KITTY'S FATHER

FRANK BARRETT

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KITTY'S FATHER

BY

FRANK BARRETT

AUTHOR OF

'THE ADMIRABLE LADY BIDDY FANE,' 'THE SMUGGLER'S SECRET,'

'FETTERED FOR LIFE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1893

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KITTY'S FATHER

CHAPTER XVII.

OUR GREAT TROUBLE.

Jack threw aside the light and laid down his cigar, looking at Kitty incredulously. The pain in her pale face forbade the supposition that she was jesting. He sat down by her side, and said with gentle earnestness :

'You do not mean what you said. There is some misunderstanding.'

'No, indeed no ! There is no misunderstanding now. See, I am quite calm. The little fit of madness is past, and I am ashamed

to have lost my head so. In sober earnestness I say again, I shall never be anything but a player. Think,' she continued, raising her eyes appealingly to Jack. 'I have been on the boards ever since I was a child. You tried to keep me off, didn't you, uncle? But it was no use; I would be a player, and a player I must be always.'

'That doesn't affect the greater question, Kitty,' said Jack, in remonstrance.

'Oh yes, it does, Jack. Your wife must not be an actress, and I must be. Movement, excitement, flattery, applause, are all in all to me. I could not live without them.'

'If the stage is so dear to you I will not take you away from it. You shall still play, and yet be my wife.'

'That is impossible. You would not let your wife travel from town to town.'

'I will get you a fixed engagement in London; or, if you must travel, I will travel too,' he said. And then, Kitty shaking her

head, he continued: 'You did not think it impossible a week ago.'

'No; for then you were a poor author, with so little to hope for that, had the play failed, you might have enlisted as a common soldier for mere subsistence. Then it was possible that we might lead a wandering life, living by our wits, taking good luck and ill as it came. But that is all changed now. You are a man of fortune.'

'The greatest fortune in the world is worth nothing to me, save as a means of procuring happiness. Love is worth more than money, Kitty, for money cannot buy it. I abandon everything for love and you.'

'You cannot do that,' she protested despairingly. 'You have duties—friends.'

'Friends,' he interrupted—'I have none but those I found in adversity. Are the rest worth the name, who turned their backs on me when I showed them my position and implored the loan of a few pounds?'

'But you will find other friends. A man must have the society of other men like himself in means and tastes and education. I should be awkward and ill at ease in the society of those who live in a higher circle. A man may be forgiven for marrying an actress; but the actress—who will accept her as a friend? The best of us are only tolerated for the amusement we give. There is no real friendship between society and us Bohemians.'

'Who has put those notions into your head?' Jack asked.

'You, Jack. Your play is a satire upon the folly of the husband who tries to make a place for his uneducated wife in society by pretending that she is a blue-stocking, and attributing her solecisms to the eccentricity of genius. And if I did not see the moral at first, it was because I was too happy to think.'

'And you will let the moral of a farce mar the happiness of a lifetime?'

'No, Jack; but it shall spare us the unhappiness of a lifetime. We have known each other only a few weeks, but years and years and years are before us. Our hearts will not break; in a little while we shall smile again, and perhaps one day we shall almost forget each other. That will be better than the misery which must come from an unequal marriage. We cannot be always as—as we have been, Jack. There must come a time in the lives of all married people when they need new ideas, new friends, fresh departures; and then, if they are not quite on the same level, the husband goes one way and the wife another, and they no longer love each other, and——'

'Stop, Kitty—for Heaven's sake, stop!' cried Jack, interrupting her. 'Nothing in my fortunes has changed so much as you. These thoughts and feelings are not yours. You could not have spoken like this a week ago. The advantages you credit me with are no

greater now than they were then, with the exception of some pecuniary gain; so that it comes to this: you refuse to marry me because accident has made me a little richer than I was when I asked you to be my wife. But the same accident may make me poor again. You rejoiced at the prospect of my play enriching us; and yet, to be consistent, you should have raised the same objections you urge now—indeed, to be logical, you should have stipulated upon your husband remaining poor.'

Kitty, dropping her head. admitted that she had been to blame for not considering fully the consequences involved in accepting his offer; but against this Jack protested vigorously:

'You were right then,' he said; 'you are wrong now. Your heart cannot mislead you; it is your reason that is at fault. If your heart bade you refuse me—if I thought that you ceased to love me, I should accept your

refusal without remonstrance. But I cannot believe that, for you have given me proof within this hour that you love me still.'

She covered her face with her hands, but the hot blood was visible mounting to her little ear.

'It is not a thing to be ashamed of, Kitty dear,' he said quietly.

'It is; it is,' she murmured—'knowing, as I did, that I ought not to be your wife.'

'But your heart told you that you should be my wife, and you yielded to its better voice.'

'I would have written to you a week ago, but I thought it better to see you, and face the difficulty.'

'Assuredly a letter would not have removed it. If you had told me all—ten times as much as you have said now—I should still have demanded a better explanation. You give me the right to demand it when you show me that your refusal is not due to any

failing of affection and love. The reasons you give are so contradictory that I cannot believe you really mean what you have said.'

'I do mean what I say,' she said, with renewed energy. 'Indeed, indeed, I cannot be your wife.'

'Then you force me to conclude that there is some other reason for your refusal. What is it? I must find that out before I give up the dearest hope of my life.'

The tone of firm resolution in which he spoke terrified me, for I said to myself that if a man of his intelligence and penetration persisted in seeking the true cause of Kitty's refusal, it would not be long before her father's crime was discovered; and I foresaw that Kitty herself would be forced to divulge the secret. She, too, with the evidence of her own failing resolution at hand, must have perceived the danger of provoking him to close inquiry. She turned to him with entreaty in her poor face and trembling voice,

and said: 'I beg you to believe me. I have given you the only explanation I can.'

'Then, if I am to believe that,' said he, springing to his feet, 'and that only, the one obstacle that stands between us shall quickly be removed. I will renounce my fortune; I will be still the poor author you promised to marry—ay, if need be, I'll go back still farther, and join the ranks, rather than lose you for my wife.'

Again passionate love and admiration got the better of Kitty's little head in this terribly unequal struggle, and a delirious joy seemed to stream from her eyes as she looked at her hero-lover; and then, as if bewildered by the turbulent thoughts that shot madly across her mind, she looked from him round the room with the wild expression of a hunted creature seeking some place of refuge. At that moment her glance fell upon me, and I know not what look in my face responded to the dread misgiving in my heart, but something

undoubtedly appealed forcibly to her reason, and gave a point of resistance on which her principle could exercise its force. In an instant she recovered herself, and, turning upon Jack, she said :

'It is useless. Nothing can alter the difference between us. I *will* not be your wife.' And then, holding out her hand, she added quite firmly, 'Farewell!'

'No, no!' said Jack; 'I cannot say good-bye. It is impossible that we should part like this. To-morrow, to-morrow!' and he left us without another word, like one distraught.

'Thank God you were here!' she said, when he was gone. 'I must not see him again ; I am too weak, too weak!'

She could say no more. The tears burst forth, and she left the room, sobbing as though her heart would break.

In the afternoon of the next day Jack came to our lodgings. His haggard face told of a

sleepless night—of agitation and suffering. There was little hope in his voice when he spoke.

'Where is she?' he asked under his breath, as if some dreadful calamity demanded silence.

'In her room. But you cannot see her, Jack. She begs you to spare her the pain of another scene like last night's. She's terribly cut up—I don't know how she will get through her business to-night if she doesn't get a little rest. Will you come in?'

'No, no! Poor Kitty! God knows, I don't want to pain her. I won't come in, old man. I saw the blind down upstairs. It seems as if she were really dead. Come out with me.'

I took my hat off the peg and went out, closing the door softly, for I hoped she was sleeping. It did indeed seem as if she lay dead up there by our silence and sadness.

We walked along for some distance without a word. At last he said :

'Is it really true, Holderness? It seems impossible to me. It isn't final, is it?'

'I don't think I ought to encourage any hope, Jack.'

'Has anything led you to think it possible that she might change?' he asked quietly.

'No; her mind is quite made up. She is less likely to change now than she was last night. You saw what a struggle it was then between love and principle.'

'Yes, I saw that. Oh, I know she has not given me up for any light reason. But I can't reconcile myself to it. The principle is such d——d nonsense. You haven't been putting these ideas into her head?'

This question, asked rather sharply, on top of the observation respecting the nature of Kitty's principles, roughed me up a little. It seemed as if no one could give me credit for common-sense or decent honesty.

'No, I haven't,' I replied tartly. 'I'm not in the habit of making mischief. Kitty's decision was as much a surprise to me as it was to you. And it isn't in her nature, either, to talk with everyone about a subject which she must regard as sacred. As to her principles being d——d nonsense, that's a matter of opinion for those who consider themselves competent judges on such matters. One thing is certain, principle is not d——d nonsense to her.'

'No,' said he, without taking the slightest notice of my irritation. 'She's a little brick, every way, and one must admire her right feeling, however unreasonable the scruples may be that spring from it. And those scruples are absurd.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said I, and I proceeded to cite three or four instances of the deplorable results of unequal marriages. 'In fact,' said I, in conclusion, 'it's a serious question whether artists ought to marry at all.'

'Oh, that's rubbish,' said he—'the claptrap excuse of certain artists who fail to be true to their partners! You know as well as I do that there are dozens of women in the profession equally excellent as artists and as wives and mothers. Besides, that's another question altogether. Kitty wouldn't have refused me simply because she is an actress, and it's bad enough to have the question of unequal fortune to deal with.'

'Well, Jack,' said I, 'it should be a sufficient bar to marriage that either of the parties has conscientious doubts as to its advisability.'

'That's true, Holderness,' said he, with conviction. 'But I can't think the bar insurmountable, and I won't give up all hope till I feel assured that Kitty's views are unchangeable.'

Before we parted I ventured to hint that he must consider Kitty's feelings.

'Remember,' said I, 'the poor girl has to

earn her living, and it's hard lines to have to go on the stage and play in a farce with a heart full of grief.'

'Oh, I shan't persecute her—'tisn't likely,' he replied. 'I don't mean to see her while her mind's distracted in this way. But I must know something about her—I must talk about her with some sympathetic friend.'

He spoke this with real feeling, and a grievous shake in his manly voice that touched me. I proposed that while he was in our neighbourhood I should meet him every afternoon for a stroll and a chat.

I was not yet utterly without hope that if the will were produced we might reasonably exonerate Yorke of having stolen it. That, I knew, would change Kitty's views about marriage, and this conviction was strengthened by discovering that every day she obtained a copy of a Chester newspaper from the newsvendor. I also bought copies, and day after day I found the same advertisement offering

a thousand pounds for the recovery of any testamentary papers belonging to the late Vicar of St. Botolph's. The fact that the advertisements still appeared proved to my mind that Kitty's father possessed the will, or had destroyed it to secure the fortune to his son-in-law.

I told Kitty I had seen Jack, and she was eager to know all about our walk; but when I had no more to say on the subject, she said, after a little quiet meditation:

'Uncle, we had better not say anything more about him. I'm like my poor father—I want to forget.'

After that I was careful to hold my tongue; nevertheless, she knew perfectly well why I went out every afternoon, and she never offered to come with me. It was another proof of her courage and resolution that she never questioned me again about Jack, though her curiosity to know what he had been talking about, and her anxiety to know if he was

bearing his burden bravely, must have been great. I believe she saw him in the audience, though I never could find him there, for sometimes she would play to all parts of the house save one, and that, without a doubt, was where she had discovered him.

But, notwithstanding her courage and endurance, the loss of her lover and hope deferred preyed upon her mind and affected her physical health considerably, so much so that on the second night of our week at Liverpool she was forced to leave the stage in the second act before the fall of the curtain, and Cooper had to come forward and beg the consideration of the audience on account of Miss Yorke's sudden indisposition.

'It was nothing,' she declared in a tone of vexation when I went up to her. 'It was silly of me, but I couldn't help, I felt so giddy.'

She went on in the third act, and, encouraged by the applause that greeted her,

played her part through as well as she had ever played it.

After the show, when I went outside to wait for her, Jack crossed quickly from the opposite side of the road, and, seizing my arm, asked breathlessly if Kitty was better. Then I knew that he had been in the house at the moment of her attack.

'Yes,' I replied; 'she is all right now.'

'Thank God!' said he fervently. 'I fear I am to blame for this. Come to me if you can to-morrow morning early. I shall not rest till I know there is no danger.'

He left me hurriedly, that Kitty might not see him when she came down from her dressing-room.

At ten the next morning I went to the hotel where Jack was staying. He was waiting for me outside, and when I told him that Kitty had breakfasted with me and seemed quite herself again, he pressed my arm to his side in silence, but I could see by

his face that a great load was removed from his mind. Presently, as we were walking down the street, he pulled out his pipe and filled it with a sigh of satisfaction. That was another good sign, for a man's mind must be at peace for him to smoke with enjoyment.

'I shall go away to-day, old man,' he said, after a couple of whiffs. 'This has woke me up. I ought to have gone a week ago, instead of hanging about like an idiot. But you can't tell what a joy it has been even to look at her from the back of the pit. I ought to have known that her resolution was not to be shaken after that night, and it was horribly selfish and despicable to hang on. That wasn't the first time she found me out in the house.'

We had reached the water's edge, and, coming to some bales that stood upon the quay, we sat down with one accord, and smoked there in silence, looking at the

shipping before us. Now that I knew he was going to leave us, I realized more fully what it was to lose such a friend, and I said to myself, 'If I feel this depression at my heart, what must poor Kitty feel, to whom this young fellow is a thousand times more dear!'

'You will write to me now and then, Holderness,' said Jack after awhile, as he took a little box from his waistcoat pocket —'just to keep in touch with me?'

'Of course I will, Jack,' said I mournfully.

He had opened the little morocco box. It was lined with white velvet, that set off a diamond ring. It was beautiful to look at; the diamonds threw out flashes of coloured light as he turned the box in his hand, looking down at it reflecting.

'I bought it for her,' he said quietly. 'Lord, how my heart beat with delight at the thought of putting it on her finger! It was

to have bound us together for ever.' And then, closing the box tenderly, he added: 'No other finger shall wear it.' And he tossed it out far into the water.

'Good heavens!' thought I, 'that may be worth forty or fifty pounds.'

We got up and walked away, neither having anything to say. I stopped at the end of the street where we lodged, but he said:

'No, I'll go in with you. I must say good-bye now.'

So we went into the house, and I, with a heart as heavy as lead, went up to Kitty's room and told her Jack was below, waiting to bid her good-bye.

'Shall I go down with you?' I asked, as she came into the passage.

'No, I am strong now,' she replied, and ran downstairs.

I followed silently, and, passing the sitting-room, went outside and waited there.

Very shortly after Jack came out. His chin was twitching ; his eyes were filled with tears. He wrung my hand in silence, and hurried away with a brief nod. I knew that it was all over.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KITTY'S FATHER APPEARS IN A NEW CHARACTER.

The very next day I ran up against Bob Yorke in Loftus Street. I hardly knew him at the first glance. The hair on his face, which was in a scrubby condition when I last saw him, had grown into a respectable beard and moustache. He wore a silk hat and a nice ribbed dark frock-coat, a pair of tweed trousers, and smart boots, with a bit of gray gaiter showing. In his hand he carried a small sample case with a leather strap and handle. Anyone would have taken him for a genteel traveller in fancy goods.

I was glad to see him for one reason and angry for another.

'Halloa, Mr. Holderness! what a time it is since I saw you last! How do you do?' said he, as he shook my hand. 'Come on; let's have a drink.'

He had exactly the brisk, jaunty manner of a successful commercial man. He played his part admirably, possibly to deceive the business men with whom the street was thronged. I followed him into the private bar of the adjacent house to escape observation, and as the door swung to I said sullenly:

'What does this mean? What is your game now?'

'I'm travelling for Messrs. Shank and Facet, of Birmingham,' he replied cheerfully, as he put his case on the bar and gave it a slap. 'Now, can I show you anything in the button line—ivories, bones, or fancies?'

'A likely thing,' I growled, 'that any re-

spectable firm would employ a man with your record. Why, they wouldn't trust you with a bag of samples.'

'You will do it, Mr. Holderness, eh?' said he, with a pretty hard side-kick and a backward flick of his hand to make me aware that someone was on the other side of the glazed partition within hearing. 'You theatrical men will have your joke. Well, what's it to be—Scotch?—Two Scotch, miss,' to the barmaid, 'and the *Express*, if you've got it. —Well, you're doing good biz here. I dropped in and had a look at your show last night.'

The change in his appearance accounted for my not seeing him in the gallery, whither I invariably cast my eye on going into the orchestra.

The barmaid brought the whisky and the paper. Yorke paid her from a little case that contained, I should say, ten or fifteen sovereigns, added water to our drams, chatting

all the while lightly about the play, as though he had seen it for the first time, and opened the paper as I drank.

'St'ordinary thing, these robberies!' he exclaimed, laying his hand on the open sheet, where I saw in big type, 'Another burglary at Birkenhead. A policeman shot.' 'This is the third in a fortnight. Policeman shot. That looks as if the game was up. Till now the police have been nowhere—ain't got near 'em. They've got clear off, though, again,' he continued, still glancing down the report. 'It beats me altogether, this series of burglaries. I can understand them breaking into a house and bolting with the swag, but it's past everything, their sticking to the same place and doing a whole string of 'em under the very nose of the police. How do they get rid of the plunder? That's what I want to know.'

Another furtive kick, accompanied by a wink as he raised his glass, signalled me to

finish my whisky, the man in the next compartment being still there.

'Well, here's luck,' said he, tossing off the drink. 'I must be getting on. Coming my way?'

We left the bar, and he, taking my arm, led me up Darly Street, and turned into the Commercial Hotel there, telling me in an undertone that we might get five minutes' private chat in his room.

On the first floor two men were gossiping. Yorke opened the door of his room and told me to go in, he himself returning to speak to the men, who had saluted him as we passed. I looked round the room. There was a large square case beside the bed, covered with black oilskin and fastened with a bright nickel lock. Putting my hand under the strap, I tried to lift it. It was too heavy for me.

'Was it likely,' I asked myself, 'that a genuine traveller would take samples in such quantities? Or even supposing that he

supplied occasional customers with a certain quantity of merchandise instead of booking the order, was it possible for this man Bob Yorke, who but a week or two since was picking up a precarious living on racecourses, to get such a parcel of goods confided to his care ?'

He came to the door as I took my hand from the strap.

'You've got hold of a heavy line there,' he said in his loud voice, intending to be heard by his friends on the landing. 'Are you a buyer for a job lot of first-class brass trousers ?'

He shut the door with a bang, and, coming to my side, continued in a low tone of anxiety, his manner changing as much as his voice :

'What's the matter with Kitty ?'

'Why,' I replied angrily, 'her heart is broken, that's what's the matter—and you are the cause.'

'What do you mean by that?' he asked sharply.

'It's all over between her and Mr. Sherridan. The marriage is broken off.'

'What—he has thrown her over now he's come into that fortune?'

'No; he's a gentleman and an honest man. It's Kitty who refuses to marry. And, what's more, she never will marry while she believes her father to be—what you are.' I pointed to the black case beside the bed as I spoke, feeling convinced that it contained the plunder obtained by the Birkenhead burglaries.

'What!' he exclaimed, 'you have broken your promise and betrayed me?'

'You betrayed yourself—the sandal-wood box aroused her suspicions, and she demanded the information she had a right to know respecting you. I told her no more than I knew; but that was enough to damn you.'

He struck his open palm with his fist and turned away in silent wrath.

'Have you told Sherridan?' he asked, after a short interval, facing me sharply.

'No,' I replied. 'Though, to be quite fair and upright with him, I ought to have told all I knew about you when I first learnt that he intended to propose to Kitty. It would have saved her this extra grief, maybe. As for Kitty, I believe she would rather suffer anything than reveal your disgrace. She is loyal, and, considering how you have neglected her, the affection she bears you is amazing.'

'What! she thinks kindly of me?' he asked eagerly.

'Indeed she does, Bob; and I feel certain that if she could find you she would leave me —give up everything, and throw in her lot with yours, no matter what you are.'

He sat down on the side of the bed, and seemed greatly moved to hear this.

'Come,' I continued, observing this change in him, 'doesn't this induce you to abandon

your present course? Will you come home with me now and see her?'

He shook his head sadly, with a vacant look in his face, his eyes fixed on the floor. It was some time before he spoke. At last he said, lifting his head: 'I can't understand it. You say she loves me, and yet she falls suddenly to the conclusion that I am a thief and a murderer.'

'I am not certain that her conclusion was so sudden as it seems. There was no certain information respecting your fate, and the very way in which we all hushed up your misdoings may have awakened her suspicions. She is a woman now, remember, and a very clear-headed and sensible little woman, too. And though we said nothing openly before her, yet she may have heard stories about you. Girls will gossip, and women can't keep secrets.'

'No, nor some men either,' he observed bitterly.

Taking no notice of this dig, I pursued :

'Strong as the evidence was against you, she still hoped that you would be cleared.'

'What reason did she give Sherridan for breaking off the match ?'

'Inequality of position.'

'Does he believe that is the sole motive ?'

'No.'

'Then he, too, is inquiring for the real cause ?'

'Yes.'

He jumped up from the bed, and paced across the room with his hands in his trousers-pockets.

'Does she still hope that her suspicions may be disproved ?' he asked, stopping before me.

'Yes. Every day she has taken in a Chester paper since we learnt from Admiral Strong that he had advertised for the lost will —you have seen those advertisements ?'

Without answering my question, he seized

hold of the fact that we had seen Admiral Strong, and pressed me with question after question until he knew every particular of the interview. Then he asked if we had seen anyone else from Chester, where Jack had gone, and many other things, all, as it seemed to me, with a view to discovering the full extent of his own danger. Finally he said, regarding me with sombre vexation :

'This all comes of your stupidity, Dick. If you hadn't suspected me, Kitty never would.'

'Well,' I replied, controlling my indignation, 'you can undo all the mischief I have done if you will, and I don't see any reason why you shouldn't. If that will were restored in a roundabout way Kitty would believe you innocent. For the strongest evidence against you is the fact that you are holding it back to secure her husband's fortune.'

He nodded, tapping the back of one hand

with the fingers of the other reflectively, his eyes once more fixed on the floor.

'You haven't destroyed that will?' I asked.

He shook his head.

'Then why shouldn't it be given up?'

'I must think about that,' said he, suddenly recovering his brisk manner. 'Now we will go down. We've been long enough here.'

'Wait,' said I, laying my hand on his arm as he was about to open the door. 'What do you intend to do?'

'Well,' said he, with a harsh laugh, 'if I knew myself you would be the last person in the universe I would take into my confidence.'

CHAPTER XIX.

WE BREAK UP AND PART, KITTY AND JACK AND I.

We parted in the street at the door of the hotel, Yorke shaking my hand effusively, with the promise to drop into the theatre and see me between the acts. But this I knew was only intended to mislead any bystanders who might be observing us. I saw him no more while we were at Liverpool, and as there were no more burglaries in Birkenhead or the neighbourhood, I concluded that he left very soon after our interview.

And now for some two or three weeks nothing occurred to break the monotony of our existence — and monotonous indeed it

was after the exciting events that preceded Jack's departure—and I missed the pleasant companionship of our lost friend more than I could have anticipated. But what was this loss to me compared with that which Kitty had to bear! And yet she went through her performance night after night with an unflagging spirit, and in our daily intercourse suffered no repining word or impatient action to betray the deep sorrow and bitter disappointment she had to endure. Her resignation, her fortitude, and unvarying sweetness of temper under these trying conditions, often put me to the blush. It was she who made light of the trifles that annoyed me; she who coaxed me into action when I got torpid and morose; she who found topics of conversation when I was silent. Then I would say to myself: 'It is too bad that such helpful sweetness should be wasted on a spiritless, dull old fellow like me.'

Still, there were signs of secret suffering

which she had not the power to conceal. Outsiders like Cooper, not remarkable for quick observation and sympathy, whispered to me, 'What's the matter with Kitty? She looks quite old when she comes off the stage. She's losing flesh, and she ought not to have those lines under her eyes.' This added to my feeling of depression; but we were not yet at the end of our vein of ill-luck. One day in the second week of July, Cooper, after paying me my week's salary, said:

'You'll have to look out for another show, Holderness. I've made over all the rights of "The Blue-stocking" to Bramley Howard, and he's going to produce it in London. I spoke to him about Kitty, but it seems his wife is to take her part, so that's no go.'

'Well, you will start another show, I suppose?' said I.

'No, thank you. I've weighed it all up, and find that when I've squared up with everybody I shall be just about where I was

when I started. I am satisfied to get out of it without burning my fingers, but I shan't meddle with hot coals again for a little while.'

'This is a bad job for us—out of collar in the middle of the off season. When do you close?'

'July the thirtieth. I'm very sorry, you know, old man, but I have to look after my little bit.'

Seeing my long face when I joined her, Kitty asked me at once what had happened; but instead of demonstrating any regret to find that we were so soon to be thrown out of work, her face lit up with pleasure.

'The play is to be produced in London. Oh, that is just what we have been hoping, isn't it?' said she.

Her first thought was of Jack: his success was more to her than our engagement.

'But we're not in it. Neither you nor I.'

'I didn't expect to be,' said she. 'It wasn't likely they would take an unknown

player from the provinces to play the part. I wonder who they will have?'

'That's settled—Mrs. Bramley Howard.'

'Well, everyone knows her. It's sure to be a success!'

I shook my head. Mrs. Bramley Howard was said to be the most beautiful woman on the stage, and the silliest and vainest, it was rumoured, amongst those not carried away by her personal charms and wonderful dresses.

'I only hope she may play it half as well as you do, my dear,' said I; though I really did not hope anything of the kind. 'But what are we to do?'

'Send an advertisement to the *Era*, to be sure,' she replied cheerfully.

Nearly every change inspires hope of something better in the minds of young people; it's not the same thing, however, with those who have passed the meridian. But Kitty had a special reason for desiring some new departure, some break in the routine of exist-

ence which should divert her thoughts from the misfortune that had befallen her. I think she would have welcomed a spell of minor hardships to stimulate her faculties and prevent her mind from brooding.

We sent our advertisement to the *Era*, to be inserted in the 'out of collar' columns, and I wrote also to my agent in Blackfriars Road; but nothing came of these applications, and the end of our short season was approaching with alarming rapidity, when at Hull we fell in with Mr. Baker's Old English Comedy Company. In this company was an old friend of ours, Mrs. St. Vincent. Off and on I had known her since she was a slip of a girl playing Ariel at Old Sadler's Wells, and now her size and years only permitted her to take such parts as Juliet's nurse and Mrs. Hardcastle. But a better Mrs. Hardcastle never walked the boards, and she was as good a woman as ever lived—cheerful, honest, outspoken and kind-hearted; a little dressy, per-

haps, but with a deal of sound common-sense in her head, for all that.

As soon as I told her how we were situated, she promised to speak to Baker on behalf of Kitty, as their Miss Hardcastle was giving herself airs, and pretending that she only stayed on to oblige. Well, the upshot of this was that Baker called upon us the following morning, and offered Kitty a six weeks' engagement, at five pounds a week, and the usual expenses. He regretted, however, that he could offer me nothing, as the company would be going to Dublin the first week in August, and he should take no band, but trust to what he could find there in the way of music. At this Kitty and I looked at each other ruefully, and she at once said that she must take time to reflect before deciding. Baker said he should be leaving the next day, whereupon I promised he should have our decision that evening, and he went away.

The prospect of losing Kitty for six weeks was very grievous to me, for up to this we had never been parted for more than a few days at a time since she had been under my protection; but I felt that now I must sink all selfish considerations for the sake of the poor girl. I knew that she had long wanted to go to Ireland to make herself acquainted with Irish dialect and character, and it was clear that the sea-trip and the complete change of scene and society would do her good. In addition to this, I felt that the companionship of a cheerful and light-hearted woman like Mrs. St. Vincent, who I was perfectly sure would take charge of her like a mother, must have a far more beneficial effect upon her mind than anything a sombre old fellow of my sort could offer in the way of consolation. So I put the most cheerful face I could on the affair, and meeting the objections she raised on my behalf by declaring that I should be glad of a little holiday to visit my brother, I induced her to

sign an agreement with Baker that evening for the Irish tour.

Mrs. St. Vincent expressed the greatest delight with this result, and promised me that Kitty should not go out of her sight until she brought her back to me. That was of little importance, however, for Kitty, I knew, was quite able to take care of herself, and might be fully trusted to do what was right, no matter what her condition should be.

I could see that Kitty was greatly pleased with this arrangement, though her affectionate heart was saddened whenever the idea of my solitude occurred to her.

'I can't bear to think that you will be alone,' she said, with tears in her eyes.

To set her mind at ease on this point, I wrote to my brother Charles telling him that I proposed to spend a few weeks with him at Peckham, and on receiving a reply to the effect that his house was always open to me, I pretended to be highly elated by the pros-

pect his invitation presented of high living and general jollification. This required a good deal of pretence, for, besides the fact that my brother's invitation was anything but cordial, I knew that Charles, being dyspeptic and abstemious, was frugal in the matter of diet, and, having a serious turn of mind, devoted the few hours of relaxation which business permitted to open-air preaching on Wandsworth Common. Probably Kitty knew this, for she was hardly less delighted than I when, just at the last moment, I got an engagement to conduct the band at Scarborough during the absence of Mr. Jones, the bandmaster, who had been struck down with typhus fever. I regarded this as a rare stroke of luck—my engagement, I mean—for, though there were three concerts a day with twelve numbers in each, and sacred music on Sunday, the pay was good, the musicians fairly capable, and there was no street work, as at Margate or places of that kind, where I

believe the *chef d'orchestre* has to go round the terraces with a little tester bag for contributions, and catch whatever is thrown from the windows. Kitty insisted on my making sure of this exemption before she permitted me to accept the post.

Kitty was very busy toward the end of the week preparing for her Irish tour, but not a handstroke did she make in this direction before she had gone carefully over my wardrobe, darning the thin places in my socks, and giving an extra stitch to every shirt button, in order that I shouldn't have to do these things myself during her absence. Then on Saturday night we played the 'Blue-stocking' for the last time, after which Cooper treated the company to a nice little supper, and two or three little speeches, and we broke up shaking hands, with general goodwill and a hearty wish to meet again soon. On Sunday I put Kitty in the train for Liverpool, where she was to meet Mrs,

St. Vincent, and when it slid out of sight I felt that it had taken away all that was dear to me in life, and left the platform the most solitary, miserable man in all England. She had prepared the nicest little dinner possible for me before going, but every mouthful of chicken stuck in my throat like cotton wool, and the roly-poly pudding, which I ate only because she had made it, lay all the afternoon on my chest like a leaden bullet. I took up my baton in the evening, and a more lugubrious and depressing selection I think I never before conducted. The most rigid Sabbatarian could not have found fault with it.

These dismal feelings, however, gradually wore off during the following week. Kitty, who never failed to send me a long letter every day, bless her! wrote in good spirits, and my occupation gave me very little time for indulging in morbid reflections. There was always plenty of movement about the

stand, numbers of bright faces and gay dresses to admire ; the weather was splendid, the air bracing ; there were three or four very nice men in my band, and Mr. Jones's health gave no signs of improvement. Nevertheless, I was not gay. The days seemed prodigiously long, and I could find no companion to fill the place in my heart that Kitty had left vacant, so that more often than not I preferred a quiet seat in the spare hours of the day where I could smoke a pipe in solitude, to the society of new friends. But this state of things was altered before long.

One day, about the middle of August, when coming down from the bandstand after the afternoon concert, a hand was laid on my shoulder, and, turning about, I found myself face to face with Jack.

'I thought you were in Dublin with Kitty,' said he, shaking my hand warmly.

'No ; I have been here since we knocked

off with Cooper,' I replied, 'How did you know Kitty was in Dublin?'

'I found that out by the *Era*. She has scored again with Miss Hardcastle. Have you seen the notices in the Irish papers?'

'Yes; she has sent them on to me. The *Freeman* is splendid, isn't it? And how did your play go on Saturday? I haven't seen the London papers yet.'

'Oh, a regular fizzle,' said he with a smile, and not a sign of regret in his face. 'That was a foregone conclusion. Kitty made the play, and it won't run a couple of weeks without her. Ah, if Bramley Howard had only given her the part, it might have run for a year or two.'

Just then we met a party of three very smartly dressed young ladies and a young gentleman. They were friends of Jack's, and when he introduced me they were good enough to say some very flattering things about my band, but in such a tone of con-

descension that I felt rather ashamed than proud of my position. And I thought that perhaps Kitty was right after all, for, apart from any consideration of her father's character, she could never have endured the patronizing manners of such fine folks as these, even though they were her husband's friends.

'This is about your tea-time,' said Jack, as we left the party; 'are you going home to your lodgings now?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'will you come with me?'

'I should think so! Why, man, you don't know what pleasure it gives me to be with you again; it's like old times—almost,' he added, his voice dropping with a touch of sadness.

Neither fortune nor fine friends had weakened his affection for us.

CHAPTER XX.

A FRESH TERROR.

JACK had come to Scarborough with the intention of going on after a day or two to Whitby, but he abandoned his purpose and stayed with me, declaring that there was only one other place in the world that had any attraction now for him. That place I knew was Dublin.

We were inseparable. Every morning after breakfast we met and took a good breezy walk; after the mid-day concert we dined together at his hotel; in the afternoon he came to my lodgings and took tea with me, and after the evening concert we strolled

on the pier with our pipes, or along the shore in the moonlight, talking about all sorts of things, but chiefly about Kitty. The fund of pleasant reminiscences in connection with her seemed inexhaustible. His conversation was always cheerful and bright, and it was plain to see that, despite having thrown their engagement-ring into the sea, he still hoped that one day she would be his wife. I said nothing to encourage the hope, for I entertained none myself. The will had not been returned; the evidence against Yorke was too strong to be overlooked, and the moral obstacle of caste seemed to me now more insurmountable than ever. In addition to this, the tone of Kitty's letters led me to think that she was slowly but surely getting Jack out of her thoughts. There was not a despondent word in any of them, and though it was possible that she wrote cheerfully in order to allay anxiety on my part, I could not conceive her writing in this spirit day

after day if the loss of her lover weighed heavily on her heart.

I considered it advisable to show these letters to Jack, in order that he might draw his own conclusions from them, and undeceive himself with regard to her feelings. Contrary to my expectations, instead of being cast down, he was decidedly exhilarated by reading them.

'There's a capital healthy ring about her letters,' he said; 'one can see that she eats well and sleeps well, and enjoys life like a dear, rational, clear-headed little soul as she is. There's not a morbid thought in her mind. Look here, old man, if you screw up a string on your fiddle too tight it will give out a false note; that's just what happened with Kitty. Her mind was overstrung with mental strain and excitement, and the objections she raised on the grounds of equality were the result. The strain has passed, her

mind has returned to its normal condition, and it will all come right in the end.'

'You're wrong, Jack—you're wrong,' I said warningly.

'Not I,' he replied, laughing with a snap of his fingers. 'Wait till she comes back.'

I kept her portrait on the chimney-piece of my sitting-room, which was very gorgeous with alabaster ornaments under glass shades, and a lustre at each end. Jack called this the domestic altar, and every afternoon he brought a fresh flower and set it in the little vase beside the photograph; and surely no worshipper at a shrine ever looked with deeper devotion and adoration at his saint than Jack at the portrait of his sweetheart.

* * * * *

'How's Jones?' Jack asked one morning when we met.

'He's getting about again. He talks about coming back again to work next week.'

'I'm glad to hear that, for I must go to

Chester about Monday or Tuesday at the latest. There's some business to be done which cannot be postponed longer. And if you're out of engagement, you may be kind enough to help me through with the affair.'

'I shall be only too happy if it's in my power to help you.'

'There's no doubt about that; you have just the methodical habits I lack. Something must be done about the Vicarage. My grandfather built the house, and it's my property now. The new Vicar won't have it; he prefers the old Vicarage. I admire his taste, though I regret it. I wouldn't live in the gloomy, ugly place for anything. It gives me the doldrums every time I look at it. At the same time, it cannot be left tenantless. The house agent says he might find a purchaser if I put it up for sale before the end of August. That means the furniture must be disposed of at once. "Sell the lot by auction," I wrote to the man, and he replies

that he will do so as soon as he has a list of the family effects which I wish to reserve. Never thought of that. Of course, there are lots of things that a respectable grandson ought not to part with. That's a job I could never get through single-handed. I haven't a pocket that isn't bulged out of all shape with old letters, simply because I can never make up my mind which to burn and which to keep. It would be just the same thing with this houseful of furniture. Years hence I might be found in the midst of lumber, coated with dust and festooned with cobwebs, from sheer inability to make the first move.'

I promised to save him from this fate; and meeting Jones on parade in the afternoon, I learnt that he would certainly be able to dispense with my services by the following Wednesday.

'Then I shall wait till Wednesday,' said Jack when I told him.

'But, Jack,' said I, 'have you settled what

you are going to do with the effects you reserve ?'

'Dear me! I never thought of that,' he exclaimed. 'It don't matter much if you forget your fish-basket when you go out for a day's angling, for you're likely enough to get no fish to put in it; but this case is different: the fish is there, and we must put it in something. By-the-bye, old man, are you fond of fishing ?'

'There's nothing I like better,' said I.

'There ought to be some decent sport on the Dee. I'll remember that, anyhow.'

In order to save time, he left me on Monday with a view to finding a storehouse for the furniture, and on Wednesday morning he wrote telling me that he had taken an old mill-house on the Dee for that purpose, and asking me to let him know by telegraph at what hour I should arrive at Chester.

The idea of his taking an old mill-house to store a few pieces of furniture amused me

considerably, though it did not greatly astonish me, for, besides being unpractical, he was unthrifty to an extreme, and seemed not to know the value of money.

He met me on the platform at Chester in the afternoon, and, giving my portmanteau to a porter, took me outside, where a neat little trap was standing.

'Jump in, old chap,' said he. 'We've eight or nine miles to go, but the little mare's a beauty.'

'Eight or nine miles!' I exclaimed, stepping into the trap.

'Yes,' said he, laughing at my amazement, as he took his seat beside me. 'We're going to *my house!*'

'The old mill you spoke of?'

'That's it. The jolliest old place you ever saw, and I got it by the luckiest chance in the world. I went straight to the house-agent on Monday, and told him what I wanted—snug quarters, good fishing, and all

not too near St. Botolph's and the railway. He put me up to this place, which has been let to an artist and his family, who, good souls, cleared out last week. I saw it, liked it, and, as it was for sale, I bought it—house, meadow, weir, furniture, linen, crockery—the lot.'

'Bought it?' I exclaimed in redoubled astonishment. 'Well, at any rate you didn't take long to make up your mind in that matter.'

'You see, I could find no argument against buying it.'

'But the outlay, Jack?'

'That was not great, and I had the assurance of my house-agent that it was a bargain.' He looked at me with a smile on his face, and continued in his soft, kind tone: '"Fools and their money are soon parted"—is that what you were saying to yourself, Dick? Well, money has not brought me so much happiness that I should cling to it

tenaciously, and this little speculation is not altogether a piece of thoughtless folly. Whatever happens, it will be pleasant to have a little home to run down to now and then, to work out an idea, to idle away a few days with the go-as-you-please and do-as-you-like feeling which is not to be had in a hotel.

'Why, that's true, Jack,' I said; 'and there's another advantage you have not enumerated, but which, I wager, you did not overlook in the transaction, and that is the pleasure you can give to an old friend out of collar.'

I had not forgotten what had passed between us with regard to fishing, nor he either.

An hour's smart drive brought us to the brow of the hill overlooking the river, and through a break in the trees Jack pointed out a many-gabled red brick house by the waterside, and told me that was his mill. It was

most picturesque and charming to the eye, even at that distance.

'Ha, that's a real old English house,' said I, 'and none of your modern antiques.'

'And, consequently,' replied Jack, 'there's not a level bit of flooring from kitchen to cockloft, and there's not a doorway you can pass without bending; but, on the other hand, there's a fireplace with a settle in the old kitchen that makes you long for a chilly evening; and you can catch trout from the dairy window.'

Pretty as the old house was from a distance, I found it ten times more delightful when we drove into the stable-yard, with the sound of the weir in one's ears, and the glimpse of an orchard on one side, and of an old-fashioned flower-garden on the other bordering the course of the mill-stream, to say nothing of tea-things laid on a snow-white cloth, which caught one's eye in passing the long open latticed window of the sitting-room. A fresh

buxom woman curtseyed to us with a good welcoming smile from the porch, and a lad ran up from the orchard to take charge of the horse.

'Why, Jack,' said I in a low voice, 'have you managed to find servants and all in a couple of days?'

'They are neighbours who had the letting of the place, and looked after the late tenants, and—well, they threw themselves in with the lot.'

My room was a real picture, and, indeed, everything about the place was delightful to look at. Jack, however, would not give me time to admire one-half, but, calling out that tea was ready, turned my thoughts into another pleasant channel. And what a tea had that excellent Mrs. Bailey prepared for us! Watercress and home-made jam, and a cold ham and new-laid eggs, and toasted bacon with some hot baked cakes, fresh butter, a sweet brown loaf, an old-fashioned

tea-urn, and a great tankard of ale, 'in case either of you gentlemen should prefer it,' as Mrs. Bailey told us. 'Lord!' thought I, 'here is more than I should buy for myself in five years.' But the sight of this abundance of good things was most grateful and refreshing, I finding myself pretty sharp-set with the journey and drive, and I felt in that expansive and genial mood when everything seems to present a good side, even the extravagance of my young friend (for what was to be done, I asked myself later on, with all that left our table?).

'Jack, my boy,' said I, clapping him on the shoulder, as Mrs. Bailey left the room, 'if this cost you a thousand pounds, it's money well spent.'

He was evidently pleased to hear this, though by the twinkle in his eye I perceived that something in my observation, which I failed to remark at the time, tickled his sense of humour.

'I'm glad you like it,' said he; then, glancing round the room, he added: 'Still, there's something wanting in it. There's a lack of colour or something.'

Following his glance, I agreed with him. It struck me that a few bright flowers would look well against the dark oak panels, and that light drapery at the windows would make it gayer. I said to myself: 'What a paradise Kitty would make it, with her delicate taste and fine eye for harmonious effect!' Perhaps the same thought was passing through Jack's mind.

'It's good to have a place that one can improve,' said he. 'At any rate, there's room here for some pieces of furniture from the Vicarage.'

'Ah, we will begin that job to-morrow morning, Jack.'

He nodded, and told me that he had been over to St. Botolph's in the morning, with a view to making a beginning.

'By-the-bye,' he added, 'did I bring the keys away?' He felt in his pockets one after the other carefully, and found that he certainly had not the keys in them. 'I must have left them in the door,' he explained, adding that the keys were all together on a ring, and then concluded carelessly: 'Oh, never mind! No one is likely to go in there.'

It seemed to me excessively imprudent to leave the matter thus, and after some discussion I persuaded him to drive over to St. Botolph's in the evening and fetch them.

'I am afraid it will rain,' he said, as we settled ourselves in the trap.

'What does that matter? We have overcoats with us. And a drive in the rain is enjoyable when one has a quick horse, a good companion, and plenty of tobacco.'

Not to go over the same ground again, Jack struck out by another road, which took us considerably out of our way, so that by the time we reached St. Botolph's it was past

eight, and growing dusk. A thin rain fell, and this, together with the mist that rose from the ground and the leaden cloud that spread over the sky without a rift, made the obscurity greater. The Vicarage stood back from the road in grounds surrounded by a high brick wall. The house was partly masked by some high elms. A turning from the main road bounded one side of the grounds, and glancing down this opening, I caught sight of some outbuildings, and it was there, I concluded, from the evidence given at the inquest, that the well was situated in which the murdered Vicar had been thrown. From the moment Jack pointed out the square tower of St. Botolph's a silence had fallen on us, and neither of us spoke a word until Jack pulled up at the front gate.

'Come in with me, Dick,' said he then. 'It gives me the horrors to go into the frightful old place alone.'

I acceded willingly; and he, having attached

the rein to the gate, put his hand through the bars and turned the fastening.

'It's unlocked,' said he. 'That shows I must have left the keys in the house.'

We passed into the gloomy garden; the moist gravel scrunched under our feet. Heavy drops fell with a monotonous splash from the overhanging boughs of the elms. Amongst the evergreens that edged the walk the cobwebs hung in clotted festoons, broken with the weight of the moisture.

'Fancy living in a place like this!' said Jack, in a subdued voice, with an involuntary glance down a dark alley turning from the path in the direction of the outhouses. It was down that alley, perhaps, that his grandfather had been carried on the night of the murder.

The path opened on a lawn, overgrown now, dank and charged with wet; beyond stood the house, a fair example of architectural taste fifty years ago—perfectly square

and symmetrical, a door in the middle with a portico supported by Doric columns, flanked on each side by a veranda running along the façade beneath the bedroom windows. Under the veranda were French windows opening upon a paved terrace raised a few inches above the level of the lawn.

Jack crossed the lawn quickly to get the business over, and examined the door.

'Not there,' said he. 'I may have left them in the back-door. Wait here, old man, a minute.'

He ran off hastily, leaving me under the portico. My eyes turned with a gruesome infatuation to the windows on the left, remembering what I had heard about the position of the library. The windows were closed with inside shutters.

'By that window the poor old man was carried out,' I said to myself. 'By whom? Was it by Kitty's father?'

I was looking at the shutters with that

fixity which is peculiar to a state of mental abstraction, when a strange phenomenon paralyzed my senses, checking my breath in the very act of respiration. It seemed to me that one leaf of the shutters was slowly moving back. Was it a fancy begot by my reflections on the crime committed in that room and the uncanny influence on my mind of the gloomy surroundings, I asked myself, or was it an actual fact? I blinked my eyes and riveted my attention afresh upon the leaf of the shutter within the closed window. A dark line a quarter of an inch in breadth proved beyond doubt that the shutter was not closed, and the line grew in breadth under my eyes. I could no longer doubt the fact. There was not a breath of air to account for it, and there was but one conclusion to be drawn—someone in that room was stealthily opening the shutter to discover who had tried the door.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAN WHO WAS HID IN THE LIBRARY.

Convinced that the shutter had moved, it struck me at once that someone knowing the house to be untenanted had come there with dishonest intentions, and, finding the key in the door, had entered, pocketing the keys, and, alarmed by the sound of the back-door being tried, was now cautiously ascertaining if he could make a dash for escape by the front of the house ; and if there had been no further movement I should certainly have called out to Jack as soon as I regained sufficient self-possession to raise my voice. The terror I felt must have been plainly visible in my face to

the observer within, who commanded a view of me through the opening, and my intention to give the alarm may have been equally evident ; but be that how it may, he at once took an effectual means of silencing me by rapidly pushing back the shutter and revealing his face close to the window, with a finger raised warningly to his lips. He kept his face there just long enough for me to recognise that it was Kitty's father, and then swiftly and noiselessly he closed the shutter. The whole incident had probably occupied less than a couple of minutes, for as Yorke's face disappeared I heard Jack's firm, quick step on the path that led round from the back of the house.

My legs shook under me ; I was sick with fear, and I felt the perspiration standing cold on my face, but the vital necessity of concealing my discovery from Jack restored my self-possession to a certain degree, and I had just time to gather my wits together and take a couple of paces along the terrace before he

turned the corner. He saw me strolling along the terrace with my hands behind me, in seeming indifference; but if he had come half a minute sooner he would have found me with starting eyes and open mouth gazing at the library window, and it would have taken the very deuce to deceive him.

'They're not there,' he said, coming up the path. 'I can't tell where on earth I left them, but as all the doors are locked, and not the gate, it would seem that I had dropped them between the house and the road. However, the house is all right, so the loss will only give a job to the locksmith. What's the matter, old fellow; don't you feel well?' he asked, stopping as we were crossing the lawn and looking in my face.

'Nothing,' I stammered. 'I'm afraid I ate a little too heartily at tea, that's all.'

'Oh, well, the best thing for an attack of that kind is to get home as quickly as possible to supper,' he replied with an attempt at

gaiety which was scarcely in keeping with an uneasy backward glance at the house. 'Hang the place,' he muttered; 'the mist and gloom are enough to upset anyone. One could imagine all sorts of terrors—ghosts, strange sounds, anything!'

'Had he heard anything at the back of the house to occasion this remark? Was there someone else beside Kitty's father in there?' I asked myself.

Happily Jack's spirits rose as soon as we got away from the Vicarage, and he chatted as the mare spanked along, leaving me very little to say, otherwise I should have had to plead continued sickness to account for my silence. Indeed, it was as much as I could do to seize the sense of his observations and answer 'Yes' and 'No' appropriately, so completely was my mind embarrassed with the fact of Kitty's father being in the Vicarage and the speculations that arose from it.

I could not believe that he had gone there

with the purpose of committing a robbery; the game was not good enough. The only explanation that seemed to me at all plausible was that Yorke had entered the Vicarage not to commit another robbery, but to restore the will he had already stolen. The theory by which I arrived at this conclusion was this: Yorke had seen Jack in Chester. He also had learnt from the *Era*, or some other paper, that Kitty was in Dublin. This had confirmed my statement that the engagement was broken off, and convinced him that the only means of overcoming Kitty's scruples was to act upon my suggestion, and restore the will in such a manner that she would no longer have reason to believe him guilty of the murder and robbery. Accidental circumstances might have impelled him to make the restoration in this particular manner. For example, at the moment of seeing Jack the latter might have let the bunch of keys fall on the path in the act of dropping them into his

pocket. The possession of the keys had suggested the idea of getting into the house at a favourable time, and there finding some place in which to deposit the will—some receptacle where, in the course of time, it would be found. He had waited till the light began to fail, and then entered the house, locking the door after him for safety. Naturally it would require time to find a hiding-place for the will which might have been overlooked in the rigorous search that had been made; and his object was not yet accomplished when we arrived in search of the missing keys.

I admit this hypothesis involved a series of coincidences to which many objections could be taken, but it seemed to me on the whole fairly reasonable, and was the more acceptable because it accorded with my dearest wish. It is easy to believe what one hopes, and my belief in this explanation grew so strong that I quite recovered my equanimity by the time we reached the mill-house, and found a capital

appetite for the excellent supper laid before us, smoked a gay pipe afterwards with a glass of grog, and slept the night through like a top in the sweetest sheets that ever a man tucked under his nose. One enjoys a good bed after a provincial tour, and such accommodation as the strolling player has to put up with.

Coming down in the morning, I found Jack walking reflectively in the garden between the borders, which were gay with tall hollyhocks and good old-fashioned flowers. The wind had risen and broken the clouds up into great cumulose masses, between which the sky was of the most beautiful blue, and the water from the weir sparkled and flashed in the bright light. It was delicious.

'Thinking out another play, Jack?' said I. 'Lord! a man ought to do good work here; it's just the place.'

'Yes,' he answered, as he shook my hand, 'if one only had a collaborator to help knock the ideas into shape.'

This set me thinking how sweet it would be to see him walking up and down the old garden with an arm about Kitty's waist, and I seemed to hear their laughter in the ripple of the water as they built up the scenes of a comedy together, and discussed the matter that came from their active imaginations. 'What good work they might do, and what enjoyment and fun they could get out of their work!' I said to myself.

We strolled into the orchard and admired the crop of apples there until Mrs. Bailey's boy, Jimmy, came to tell us breakfast was served; then we went into the delightful old dining-room, with its well-spread table and a delicious smell of good things.

'There *is* something wanting,' said Jack after breakfast, as he looked round the room.

For my own part, I felt that a pipe would quite satisfy all requirements after such a plentiful repast; but, not to be out of sympathy with him, I agreed that perhaps the room

would look gayer for a flower or two here and there.

'I'd as soon wear a wreath of roses as think of cutting flowers for this room with no woman's face to give them a *raison d'être*,' said he in his bluff manner.

'Go and cut the flowers, Jack, while I get the *raison d'être*,' I replied.

We understood each other well, and while I went up to get Kitty's portrait out of my portmanteau, he fetched a handful of flowers —those, maybe, which he had singled out in his early stroll as worthy to give his sweetheart, were she there to adorn. So we chose a place and set up Kitty's likeness with flowers about it where we could see it as we came into the room and when we sat at table ; and for a certainty we both felt happier and more contented for this embellishment. But I said to myself that if Bob Yorke had acted up to my hopes and expectations, then we should indeed have nothing in the world

to desire, for Kitty herself would in a short time come to beautify this delightful house and fill it with sweetness and light.

Impatient to find if he had fulfilled my wish, I urged Jack to drive over without delay to St. Botolph's, and set about our business there; and before long we were rattling along the pleasant road in the trap.

'I suppose we shall have to go to Chester and find a locksmith in order to get into the house,' said Jack.

But just before we came into the village a policeman, recognising Jack, stepped off the pathway, touching his cap as a signal to stop. My heart went up into my mouth; for though of course he was a local policeman, it was ominous that he should have something to say to us. Had anything happened at the Vicarage? Was Yorke apprehended in an attempt to take off any property from the house? These were the questions that came

at once into my mind as Jack reined in his mare.

'Ask your pardon, sir,' said the constable, 'but you are Mr. Sherridan, I believe?'

'Yes,' said Jack; 'that's my name.'

'Have you happened to lose a bunch of keys, sir?'

'I lost them yesterday; they are the keys of the Vicarage.'

'I thought they was, sir,' said the man, putting his hand in his pocket; 'for I found the front gate unlocked, and one of these here keys fits it.' He handed up a bunch of keys.

'Yes; these are the keys I lost. Where did you find them?'

'Well, sir, they were give to me by a party as caught sight of them in the grass alongside the wall as he was passing the Vicarage this morning.'

'I should like to give him a tip. Do you know the man?'

'No, sir; the man is a stranger in these parts. All he told me was that his name was Ivins, and he was a jobbing plumber on his way to find a bit of work in Chester.'

'Well, I'm much obliged to Mr. Ivins,' said Jack; 'and if you see him again, give him this; if you *don't* see him, you know,' he added, handing the half-crown with a twinkle in his eye, 'you can keep it for yourself, Mr. Policeman.'

I had no doubt now that the keys had been given up by Yorke, for Ivins was clearly the local pronunciation of Evans, and that was the name Yorke had given me as his alias when we met at Nottingham. The significance of his giving that name to the constable was unmistakable; it was to allay my fears as to his purpose in visiting the Vicarage if I made inquiries as to the finding of the keys.

I approached the house with very different feelings to those I had experienced the night

before, for now I felt confident that my theory was sound, and that Kitty's father had found means to restore the stolen will.

Impatient to begin the search, I entered the library without one compunctious thought of the crime that had been committed there, and unhesitatingly threw open the shutters which had inspired me with such terror the night before. There was the usual furniture of a library—bookcases, cabinets, an escritoire, etc., and I took them all in at a glance.

'Where are your grandfather's papers kept, Jack?' I asked.

'Oh, they're all in London; Cunningham took them away with him,' he replied with a smile, amused, I suppose, at the promptitude with which I attacked the business.

'Well, these books, Jack: we may as well begin with them,' said I, going to a bookcase, for I thought it not improbable that Yorke had slipped the will into one of the volumes. 'Where's the key?'

'Needn't trouble about them, Dick. They're all ecclesiastical works. I shall make a clear sweep of the lot. In fact, I don't think there's anything here that I need preserve. Come into the drawing-room.'

I resolved to go into every one of the books before I left. However, to conceal my anxiety, I followed Jack into the drawing-room, where he pointed out two or three light and artistic pieces of furniture which he thought he should like to keep.

'They are family relics, I suppose?' said I, not immediately seeing his object in selecting them.

'No,' he answered; 'but I thought they might go in the oak-panelled room. Make it look a little more habitable, you know.'

Then I perceived he was thinking of what would give Kitty pleasure if she resided there.

'And there are some old oak chairs in the dining-room,' he continued, opening the door

of communication. It struck me that going at this rate we should finish the job in half an hour. Indeed, I think that was his impression, for he had left the trap at the gate.

'Why, you seem to have made up your mind pretty quickly, Jack, considering that last week you could not determine where to begin.'

'M—yes,' he replied, stroking his chin, with that suppressed humour in his face which showed the latent mirth in his disposition; 'M—yes; but you see I hadn't a mill-house to furnish then. Now, these old chairs wouldn't be out of place there, and would certainly be more comfortable than those rush-bottomed affairs. I think we'll fix on them, eh?'

'But you can buy the same sort of thing at any furniture-dealer's,' I remonstrated; 'whereas those ecclesiastical works——'

'Oh, hang the ecclesiastical works! You may have the lot, Dick, if you're fond of that

kind of reading. I'm not.' Then, changing his tone as he regarded me, he said: 'Why are you looking so precious grave, old fellow?'

'Jack,' said I, feeling that I must not let this chance slip through my hands, 'you must forgive me for opening a delicate subject, but as your happiness as well as mine is concerned, I shall make bold to say out what is in my mind. You're thinking of Kitty more than anything else, and you wish to make the old house more charming and more comfortable for her sake, believing that when she comes back from Ireland she will be your wife.'

'It's true, Dick,' said he gently; 'and don't you think she will have me when she sees that I don't care for society, and can live with contentment in a little out-of-the-world corner like that?'

'No, Jack,' said I; 'I know my niece better than you do. Her scruples are not to be overcome by such inducement, powerful as

it may be and much as she loves you. This taste for seclusion may not outlive the summer. Little by little the temptation to employ your fortune may wean you from this simple life. You believe that her objections arose from an unhealthy state of mind ; but I assure you that they will only be strengthened by additional mental vigour.'

He had sufficient penetration to see the weakness of my position—the incongruity of the objections I attributed to Kitty. Nevertheless, seating himself on a corner of the table, he folded his arms upon his broad chest and pondered gravely what I had said in silence for some minutes ; then, looking up, he said :

'These disheartening reflections did not seem to strike you in the library, Dick.'

'No ; for my spirits were buoyed up with the hope of sweeping away the obstacle by another means.'

'What means ?' he asked eagerly.

'It struck me that in going carefully through all your grandfather's effects we might by hazard light upon that which others had overlooked. Those books have a special attraction for me, because it seems possible that your grandfather might have slipped a paper into one of the volumes he was reading. If that paper was the will which Cunningham told us your grandfather made disinheriting you, and we could find it, I wager my life Kitty would sink all other objections and come to your arms to-morrow.'

'Then, for God's sake,' cried he, springing from the table, 'let's have at those books at once!'

CHAPTER XXII.

WE SEE SOMETHING MORE OF THE ADMIRAL.

We began the work at once in real earnest. My hope was backed with something like confident expectation; but it is difficult for me to say what Jack's feeling was in the matter, knowing that the ground we were going over had been worked before, and ignorant of those facts which animated me. Possibly he regarded my hope and Kitty's scruples as fundamentally groundless, though I am sure he esteemed Kitty none the less for adhering to her principles. Probably he regarded the renewed search as nothing more than a forlorn hope; but that only nerved him with a

reckless, desperate determination to fight well and die hard. With dogged patience he did his share of the work, undaunted by the hopelessness of the task, unflagging in energy. One by one we passed the books under examination. When a doubt occurred about our having overlooked a volume, he went through it, not to lose any possible chance. If the thing was worth doing at all it was worth doing well. That was clearly his opinion.

When the books were done we attacked the furniture. Not a drawer, not a cover, nor any movable part, was left unexplored. We took up the carpets, removed hangings, examined the backs of pictures and glasses. We even went so far as to sound the walls for secret cupboards or hiding-places, and all in vain. Our search occupied five whole days, and at last we were forced to admit that we could do no more. Then I had to admit to myself that whatever Yorke's object had been

in revisiting the scene of his crime, it was not to restore the will.

A feeling of savage and furious vindictiveness seized me when I thought of the man who had tricked me into this false hope—the scoundrel who, knowing that he had ruined the happiness of his daughter's life, had neglected the opportunity of redeeming his fault in some measure by restoring the will and her peace of mind.

I could not conceal the mortification and chagrin I felt, and Jack, seeing my dejection, did his best to cheer me up. For him the disappointment was far less.

'We are, seemingly, where we were before,' said he, and that meant he still hoped in Kitty's renouncing her scruples. 'We've done our best,' he added, 'and now our work is done we'll enjoy ourselves. To-morrow, Dick, we'll hunt up some fishing-lines.'

Accordingly, next morning we got together all the tackle in the place, and spent a plea-

sant morning in preparing hooks and floats and lines for sport in the afternoon. Just as Mrs. Bailey was bringing in the lunch-tray, we, sitting quietly by the window, heard a stentorian voice on the other side of the mill-stream call to the boy Jimmy, who was grubbing in the garden for worms.

'You, boy! Is the fishing in this water preserved?'

'Yes, sir,' answered little Jimmy smartly.

'Then tell your master I'm going to drop my line in here, and don't intend to take it out till I've landed half a dozen trout.'

'Do you hear that, Jack?' I asked indignantly.

He nodded with a smile of good-humour.

'I seem to know that voice,' was his only comment.

'And, boy!' the voice called again, 'you can tell your master that my name's Strong, and I live at The Cedars, St. Botolph's, in

case he may want to bring an action against me.'

In due course Jimmy came to the window, and, touching his cap, reported faithfully what we had overheard.

'Tell the gentleman,' said Jack quietly, 'that when he has done poaching I shall be greatly honoured if he will come and take a crust of bread and cheese with me.'

Presently we heard Jimmy's shrill little voice delivering Jack's message to the Admiral.

'Boy, come and hold this rod,' returned he. 'Your master, I see, is a man with some stuff in him, and damme if I don't take him at his word!'

Presently we heard what Jack called the plantigrade step of the Admiral crossing the yard, and such a gait was suitable to the uncivil old bear who a minute later marched into the room.

Jack rose to meet him.

'What, it's you, Mr. Jack!' cried the Ad-

miral, stopping short as he recognised him. 'Why, this is running into a friendly port in a fog, with a witness to it.' He flung down his straw hat, and, taking Jack's hand, gave it a grip, as I could see by the pursing of his lips, that put Jack's power of physical endurance to the test. It was obvious, also, by the nod of satisfaction with which he relinquished it, that Jack returned the grip with interest. 'And who have we here?' said he, turning upon me. 'Why, Fiddlesticks, as I live!'

I advanced my hand in fear and trembling, but he let me off with a moderate squeeze, having already got the gauge of my forces.

'And where's Miss Kitty?' he asked, looking round. 'Hard by, I warrant.'

He looked at Jack in astonishment as I explained that Kitty was playing at Dublin, and then said in a tone of disgust:

'Well, if that's your modern way of sweethearting, I'm not surprised marriage is going

out of fashion. If I were thirty years younger I'd show you how such a dainty lass deserves to be courted.'

'If you were thirty years younger,' said Jack, with a shade of displeasure on his open face, 'I should show you the shortest way into the mill-stream for touching on a subject that doesn't concern you.'

'You're right, Mr. Jack,' said the Admiral, after a moment's reflection. 'And the first thing I should do, after taking my sousing, would be to ask your pardon for having forgotten my good manners.'

With that he held out his hand, and Jack having given it the required crush of forgiveness, the skirmish ended, and we sat down to lunch.

'Though I will say,' persisted the sturdy Admiral, 'that I'm sorry Miss Kitty is not here, for a brighter, sweeter, and more fascinating little lady I never met, nor one who better understands the fine art of hospitality.'

(Jack agreed to this with a smiling nod.) 'However, as there is no lady present, we can let our cables run free without setting a watch over our hawse-holes. So now, to begin with, give us a cut of that corned beef, Mr. Jack, and be d——d to you!'

Conversation after this ran freely enough, especially on the part of the Admiral, who rated us in no measured terms, when he learnt that we had been a week at the mill-house, for not having the civility to give him a neighbourly call.

'But perhaps,' said he to Jack, 'you felt a bit chuffy on account of the reply I sent you through your solicitor with regard to the offer you thought fit to make me.'

'No,' said Jack. 'I think I understand your feeling on the subject.'

'You'd understand it more thoroughly if you'd taken the trouble to make yourself better acquainted with us. What! do you think my Nell and I have no more spirit than

a couple of needy beggars on the look-out for anyone's cast-off clothes?'

'I see,' said Jack slyly, 'that you are still advertising for the lost will.'

'I catch your aim, my boy,' replied the Admiral cheerfully; 'but allow me to observe that your guns are pointed d——d wide of the mark. If I can show any legal right to the money, I'll take it—every penny; but not a shilling will I owe to any man's generosity. Nothing in the world could pay us for the loss of independence.'

'I suppose nothing has come from those advertisements?' Jack said, with a view, I think, of turning the conversation.

'Why do you suppose that?' asked the Admiral sharply.

'Because you continue to advertise.'

The Admiral grunted, and, after eating a mouthful in silence, said:

'I thought you had a better reason than that.'

'You are still hopeful of some result?' I ventured to suggest.

'Well, I'm pretty sure of one result, Mr. Twiddle, and that is a long bill from the advertising agents. Whether I shall have the money to pay it is a matter I am not so certain about.'

Something in the old fellow's manner conveyed the impression that he was a little more reticent than he need be, and that he, to use his own expression, was now watching his hawse-hole, and not letting the cable run quite so freely as hitherto.

'If the will exists and is in the hands of an ordinary thief, the advertisements are scarcely likely to touch him now,' Jack observed, with an air which I think was purposely careless.

'Umph!' grunted the Admiral, holding in his cable still more closely.

'Perhaps,' said I tentatively, 'you have

reason to think no longer that it *has* fallen into the hands of a common thief.'

'And perhaps,' he returned, nodding at me over his ale, 'per—haps you're under the impression that I'm a leaky old hulk, and may be pumped out with a penny squirt. Here's to your health and better understanding, Twiddle.'

'Well, sir,' said I, losing my temper under his irritating rudeness, 'if you have any information that may lead to the recovery of the will it is not from us that you need trouble yourself to conceal it. And you may lay more value on this intimation when I tell you that for a week past Mr. Sherridan and I have been searching for it at the Vicarage, each day from morning till night, in order that you might be compelled to take the fortune you pride yourself on having refused. The task was comparatively hopeless, for, as you are aware, a thorough search had been previously made; but we did not relax our

efforts till we had proved to our own satisfaction that the lost will had not been overlooked by those who——'

'Hold on there,' cried the Admiral; 'I can enjoy a good tune as well as anyone, but d—— your long-winded variations! Mr. Jack, you have reason, I'll admit, to regard me as a tight-fisted old curmudgeon, spry to take what I can get, but sticking tight to what I've got; but I'll show you I'm not the mean dog that I seem neither. It's true that I've got my suspicions. I believe that the will exists, and what's more, I'm firmly convinced that I could lay my hands this very day on the rascal who's got it. But I'll tell you no more than that, for it's against the principles of honest warfare to open fire while there's a single doubt in favour of the enemy.'

'Surely, Admiral,' said Jack with a smile, 'you'd signal your fleet to keep an eye on the suspected craft to lessen his chance of giving you the slip.'

'There's something in that, to be sure,' replied the old man, scratching his chin reflectively. 'Well, if you're minded to overhaul the rascal, do you come up to The Cedars and stay with us for a few days. In that way you may gratify your own curiosity and give us pleasure at the same time. Nell's anxious as I am to see you, and you also,' he added, turning to me, 'for my girl is a rare hand at your overtures and your oratorios and hornpipes of that sort.'

After a short discussion, we promised to visit the Admiral in the following week, and he, clapping our hands on the understanding after lunch, thanked us heartily for the pleasure we had given him and took up his hat to go.

At that moment we heard the sound of wheels, and the Admiral, glancing through the window, gave a low exclamation of surprise mingled with displeasure, and muttered some-

thing about speaking of the devil and making him appear. For a moment he stood looking into his hat reflectively; then dabbing it on his head with sudden resolution, he shook hands with us again and left the room brusquely as Mrs. Bailey entered with a couple of cards.

'Ask the gentlemen to walk in,' said Jack to Mrs. Bailey, as he handed me the cards. I read on one, 'The Rev. Crawley Shepherd, B.A., St. Botolph's,' and on the other, 'Decimus Shuttle, of Chicago;' and the next minute the curate entered the room, thanking Mrs. Bailey 'so much,' followed by Mr. Decimus Shuttle, of Chicago, whom, to my complete bewilderment, I recognised as none other than Bob Yorke—Kitty's father!

CHAPTER XXIII.

ONCE MORE YORKE CHANGES HIS CHARACTER.

I WAS so completely stupefied with the astonishment of recognising Kitty's father in the soi-disant Decimus Shuttle, that Jack or the curate might have perceived that there was something more extraordinary in this visit than they comprehended had not their attention been otherwise occupied.

Yorke wore a very light gray morning suit, patent leather boots, an open collar, and a neck-handkerchief tied in a bow, French fashion. He carried a soft gray felt hat, crushed under his arm, and his hands in his jacket pocket. He had shaved off his whiskers, leaving only

a chin tuft and moustache; his complexion was noticeably changed, the sallow tint suggesting a bilious temperament with which the dull despondency of his expression harmonized admirably. He looked at Jack, and then at me, with the same indifference as he looked at the ceiling and the panels on the wall.

'Ah! I hope we don't intrude, Mr. Sherridan,' said the curate, stopping at the sight of the spread table, his elbows nipping his side, the fore arms raised, one hand holding his hat, the other extended at a right angle with his wrist. 'I should be *so* sorry if we are putting you to any inconvenience.'

Jack replied with a deprecatory gesture, and, motioning his visitors to seat themselves, himself took a chair.

Yorke plumped himself down, and Mr. Shepherd, with more circumspection, was about to accommodate himself, when his eye

fell upon me for the first time, and joyful surprise beamed on his face.

'It *is* Mr. Holderness, I declare; this is *indeed* an unexpected pleasure!' He gave me his cold, damp fingers to shake, while Yorke looked on with a shade of contempt in his apathetic face, and then, turning to Jack, said, in the mildly gay tone he might have employed in addressing a Sunday-school class:

'Now, I have to explain to you, Mr. Sherridan, the remarkable circumstances which have occasioned this visit. In the first place, you must know ——' He held his right forefinger on his left thumb to tick off the first circumstance when Yorke interrupted.

'Young man,' said he, with an unmistakable American twang in his voice, 'you can shut off right there. If there's any apologies to be ciphered up, I reckon I'm here to cipher 'em. Your name, I believe,

is John V. Sherridan, sir,' he continued, glancing at a card he had drawn from his pocket, and turning to Jack.

'It is,' replied Jack, entering at once into the spirit of his visitor.

'I am Decimus Shuttle, pig-dealer, Chicago, and I have come here to speak to you on a matter of business. If you hitch on I'll open up; if you are otherways disposed I'll clear out and give you no further trouble. Which is it to be?'

'I hitch on,' said Jack, with perfect gravity.

'I understand that you are the proprietor of the parsonage house at St. Botolph's?'

'Quite correct.'

'Well, sir, I just want to hire that house.'

'For business purposes?' asked Jack, with the slightest indication of mirth in the angle of his eye.

'If you mean, do I intend to turn the house into a bacon factory, sir, I can answer you

straight, No. On the other hand, I cannot say that I intend to incarcerate myself in that house with a view to the wild enjoyment of pleasure. Do you require further particulars?'

'A little explanation will be advisable, perhaps.'

'Sir,' said Yorke, resting his elbows on his knees, and fixing his lack-lustre eyes on Jack, 'you would not think, to look at me, that I am one of the most excitable men in the United States—to realize that fact, you ought to see me at home in the height of the pickling season. When I tell you that last fall I barrelled fifteen thousand hogs, personally conducting them from the live freight cars to their last home in the export cases, and superintending every department of the business from the sticking office to the counting-house, you will allow that I must have had a considerably lively time; and you will not be surprised to hear that on taking over the

business of P. Cassidy I fell sick in the attempt to run the two concerns under similar supervision. When the medical man in my employ took me in hand, he said: 'Decimus Shuttle, you've been killing hogs for ten years; now it's the hogs' turn, and they're going to kill you. If you go on at this rate you'll be as dead as ham in six months." "This is disheartening, doctor," said I, "just after taking over Cassidy's concern and a three years' contract for special middles just signed. It's throwing away half a million dollars, in a manner of speaking." "Well," said he, "if you prefer pig-sticking to dissolution, your only chance of gratification is to take six months' complete rest, and withdraw yourself from all exciting influences." The advice was reasonable, and, having paid for it, I made up my mind to profit by it. The first thing was to clear out of America, where the very sound of a locomotive bell would make me spring out of bed in my sleep with the notion that

another batch of hogs was being run into the depot. I arrived at Liverpool, and, inquiring there for some spot free from exciting influences, I was told that I might find Chester at this season suitable to my tastes. Determined to do the thing thoroughly, I put the same question about when I reached Chester, asking if any particular residence could be recommended as being rather more lonesome than the general run of residences. I was told that I should find your parsonage house about as lonesome as anything around. I hired a four-wheeled carriage with an aged horse to make the journey as tranquilly as possible, and was carried at a gentle walk up the hill to the parsonage. I was not disappointed in it. From what I can make out, it seems to be as peaceful a resting-place for a solitary man as anyone in my condition could wish for. This clerical gentleman was ambling on the side-walk, and, seeing me by the front gate, kindly introduced himself and gave me

some satisfactory particulars with regard to the house, and informed me where I should learn whether it was to be hired or not.'

'I have heard from Mr. Feverell that you wished to sell the *deah* old place,' Mr. Shepherd explained.

'We called on Mr. Feverell—this gentleman being good enough to accompany me—and he offered to communicate with you, but to save time I preferred to communicate with you myself. And now, sir, if you can tell me whether you care to let me have the house for a term of three months or not, we will conclude the transaction right here.'

'Naturally you wish to take the house furnished as it is?' said Jack dubiously.

'The whole block as it stands.'

'Entering into immediate possession?'

'Move my trunks up from the hotel to-morrow—that surprises you, I guess,' Yorke added, detecting a smile on Jack's face.

'Not at all. On the contrary, your wish

appeals to my fellow feeling, for I took this house under similar conditions.'

'What a peculiar coincidence, to be *sure!*' exclaimed Mr. Shepherd, raising his hands and letting them fall gently on his knees.

'Well, Mr. Shuttle,' said Jack, rising, 'I certainly wish to dispose of the Vicarage; but whether it is to my interest to let it for a short term I must leave to the decision of my agent, Mr. Feverell.'

'Price is no object, you understand, sir, and I am prepared to place any reasonable sum in the hands of your agent as security.'

'That is a matter which he will arrange with you if he thinks it advisable to let.'

'Right, sir; he will find me at the Rainbow Hotel till three to-morrow afternoon; and if I can't have the parsonage, he may fix me up with something else in the locality. Something in this way might do,' he said, addressing me for the first time, as the gushing curate seized Jack on his way towards the

door and poured out his pent-up sentiments. 'It might suit if it wasn't for the noise of that stream.' He cast one more glance round the room, and, his eyes resting on Kitty's portrait for a moment, turned to me with peculiar significance as he added: 'Silence, you understand, is just life to me in my precarious condition—and there's a good deal hangs on this life of mine.'

He could scarcely have reminded me more plainly that Kitty's lifelong happiness depended on my guarding his secret.

Jack accompanied his visitors to the front-door, whilst I, left alone in the room, endeavoured to collect my wits, that my agitation might not be observed by Jack when he returned.

The Rev. Crawley Shepherd had the talk mostly to himself now—the oily flow of his voice was only broken now and then by Jack's short and repressively cold responses. Outside he recollected that he had not said

good-bye to 'dear Mr. Holderness,' and back he came with impulsive haste, and his shining face melting with warm geniality, to give me his flabby hand and express the gladness of his heart in having met me once again.

'You must come and see me in my little home at Rose Cottage,' he added gaily; 'and I shall be *so* pleased to see you, for I have *all* the day at my disposal now, the new Vicah having his own curates and not requiring my services. And you must bring dear Mr. Sherridan with you—what a fine, noble, handsome young man!' lowering his voice, but not to such a degree that his encomiums could be lost on Jack, who was passing the window with Yorke, 'and you must bring Miss Kitty with you also'—here he raised his eyebrow with an arch roll of his fishy blue eye, as much as to say that he could be a gay dog at times—'and we shall be *so* happy all togethah with a nice cup of tea. But I must not keep my worthy Mr. Shuttle waiting—

good-bye ;' and, jerking this farewell out as though from the very bottom of his heart, he tripped off with his gloves and umbrella held up well in front of him.

'Well, Dick,' said Jack, with a short laugh, as he returned to the room, 'we've had some odd specimens of humanity in the form of visitors to-day, and no mistake.'

He threw himself in the easy-chair by the window, and, thrusting his hands in his pockets, looked out with a cloud gathering on his face. Then, turning to me, with creased brows, he said:

'I think that's about the most despicable type of man that exists, don't you, Dick ?'

'Well, you see, Jack,' I replied, my old feeling for Kitty's father impelling me to say a word in his defence, 'one must not expect too much of a pig-dealer.'

'Oh, Shuttle !' he exclaimed, his brow expanding, and a smile playing over his lips; 'I rather like that fellow. He's amusing, at

any rate, and a decent, honest sort of man, too, I should say by the look of him. But, by Jupiter! he's a rum one—justifies all the Yankee yarns I've heard. It was hard to believe that he really meant what he said. It would be a risky thing to put such an incident in a play, but in a book the critics would at once declare the whole character overdrawn.'

It struck me also that Yorke had over-acted his part—'clowned it,' as the actors say.

'One doesn't meet Chicago pig-dealers every day,' I ventured to suggest.

'That's true. After all, no character in fiction is so improbable as those we meet in real life. And Shuttle's perfectly consistent in his thoroughness. But I wasn't thinking of him; it's that beastly curate that stirs up my bile. A fawning, cowering brute, with something of the slimy, sticky reptile in him. He's not pleasant even as a study; you can't

laugh at him for the feeling that he is something more than a mere idiot.'

'That was Kitty's impression.'

'I know. That is perhaps why I dislike him. It may be that I am prejudiced.' He lifted his eyebrows, looking through the window again; then, after a moment's silence, he turned to me, saying: 'Did you hear Strong's remark when he caught sight of him?'

'Something about the devil appearing when he was called?'

'Just so, and that just after he had been speaking of someone he suspected as the purloiner of the missing will.'

'Jack,' said I eagerly, 'do you think the curate did it?'

'M—no,' he replied slowly, with the air of one who had already pondered the subject. 'Divide the pros and cons, the cons have it. In the first place, the curate's too feeble, physically and morally, to perpetrate a crime

of that magnitude. Then there's the absence of motive. Five hundred pounds, which is the utmost that was stolen (with the will, probably), would not pay for the loss of a comfortable berth, with expectations, in the Vicarage. Moreover, I am inclined to think that he is not the man the Admiral suspects. For, if you remember, he led us to understand pretty clearly that we might discover whom it is he suspects by a visit to The Cedars. Well, the curate is the last person in the world we are likely to see there. No one in the world could be more antipathetic to a man of Strong's character than that servile, truckling Crawley Shepherd.'

'We shall see,' said I, after a little reflection.

'Yes; and I am eager to go over to The Cedars on that account. This mystery is beginning to fascinate me. It's like a chess problem. Harking back to the Admiral's observation upon devils, I'm disposed to put

another construction on it. I have found that the thought of one unpleasant character generally conjures up another *bête noir*. The Admiral must have known Shepherd a long while, and it's possible, if not probable, that his ideas, turning from the man he suspects, had just lighted on the other object of his dislike when Shepherd came in sight.'

I agreed to this supposition, but my fear prevented another deduction. What if the Admiral had recognised Bob Yorke in the fly as well as Crawley Shepherd! What if we found Kitty's father an accepted visitor at The Cedars when we went there!

'Let us go and find the Admiral,' said Jack, rising; 'we may be able to draw him yet.'

But when we went out the old man was not to be seen. Either he had failed to catch anything in that place, or he had gone off to avoid encountering a man he abominated.

'So much the better,' said Jack. 'We can drop in our lines and smoke in peace.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LETTER FROM KITTY.

I was glad of the opportunity our occupation afforded to devote my thoughts to the events of the afternoon. The possibility that Shepherd had committed the crime at the Vicarage was like a rift in the leaden sky, exciting a hope of better times to come. If Yorke could be freed from the suspicion of murder, I felt that the greater part of my anxiety and trouble would be removed. It is true that shifting the responsibility of that crime from his shoulders would leave him still burdened with the grave offence of robbery, but robbery appeared to me a trivial affair in comparison

with the hideous crime of murder. Incomprehensible as his conduct was, it seemed to me out of all probability that he could meditate taking up his abode in the Vicarage if he had committed a murder there. That indicated a callous state of feeling that precluded the possession of all human sentiment, whereas he had proved beyond doubt that he entertained a very strong feeling of paternal affection. But then, again, if he really loved Kitty, why should he jeopardize her happiness by continuing a course of crime, and expose himself to detection in a manner which on the face of it was most reckless and foolhardy? If he had no means of existence except by robbery, surely, I thought, he might exercise his unhappy vocation in some place where he would be less open to suspicion. No reasoning, no hypothesis, could dispel my conviction that he was carrying on a desperate system of robberies. I could now account for his intention to take the Vicarage for a certain time

only by the supposition that it was to serve him as a head-quarters from which to make depredatory excursions, and a depot for the plunder obtained by such burglaries as those in which he had been concerned at Birkenhead. That he had already made a considerable amount of money by this business was obvious; and it was equally evident to me that he had laid his plans for a still more extensive system of plunder.

'Before long,' I said to myself, 'Chester will be pillaged just as Birkenhead was a few weeks back, and every morning I shall open the paper in fear and trembling, with the expectation of finding another outrage announced.

And now, my thoughts flying off in another direction, it struck me that Yorke had not got the will, or that if he had found it in the sandal-wood box, he must certainly have destroyed it with a view of enriching Jack, as soon as he knew that he was engaged to

Kitty; otherwise, having her welfare at heart, he would have adopted the simple means I suggested of returning the will to clear himself from suspicion. Then it occurred to me that, seeing their engagement broken, and no prospect of their coming together again, he had resolved to make a fortune for her that might counterbalance to some extent the loss she had suffered by not marrying Jack, and that he had taken to this dreadful trade for her sake. 'But, alas!' thought I, 'it is a legacy of shame that you are leaving your daughter, Bob Yorke, and nothing more; for she will never touch a penny of your ill-gotten gains, and her life will be for ever embittered by the reflection that it was her need which first suggested these criminal measures to your mind.'

This put me in mind of the bank-notes Yorke had given me; excepting those which I had given Cooper on the 12th of June, all were still in my possession (for I should not

have dared to put a single one in circulation had I needed money ever so much, for fear the numbers had been taken by the bankers from whom old Mr. Sherridan obtained them), and I made up my mind that when I found an opportunity I would give them back to Yorke. 'That will convince him,' thought I, 'that we have not profited by his dishonesty (except in the matter of fifty pounds, handed over in innocence to Cooper), and do not intend to soil our hands with such ill-gotten gains; that may lead him to see the folly of building up a fortune for Kitty which she will not accept.' I reflected also that I should be less likely to get myself into trouble if I gave up these notes, for which I had no safer hiding-place than an old piccolo-case in a corner of my portmanteau.

This medley of suppositions and considerations, which I have tried to bring into some sort of consecutive harmony (but not very successfully, I fear), so engrossed my thoughts

that I failed to catch a single fish all the afternoon, which is not to be wondered at, for I found on our return that I had left my box of worms at home, and must have been angling all the time with nothing whatever on my hook. However, the loss was not felt, for Jack had taken five fine trout, which we ate for dinner, and an excellent dish they made.

Jack made no allusion to the events which had exercised his mind to such a degree, either because fishing had driven them out of his thoughts, or because he considered lighter subjects more suitable for discussion at table; but when the meal was over he ordered the trap to be brought round, and asked me if I would go with him to Chester. I readily agreed, having had quite enough of my own company in the afternoon, and accordingly we drove into Chester, where we had the good-fortune to catch Mr. Feverell, the house-agent, just as he was leaving his office.

'Good-evening, Mr. Sherridan,' said he, coming to the side of the trap with a smile. 'Have you seen the American gentleman who wishes to take the Vicarage?'

'Yes; that's precisely the matter I've come over to speak to you about,' Jack replied. 'What do you advise?'

'Well, sir, I don't know Mr. Shuttle, and it seems he wishes to take immediate possession. The application is, to say the least of it, unusual.'

'But not unprecedented. I'm not in a position to take exception to anyone who wishes to take immediate possession.'

'True, sir; you knocked your affair off sharp enough, certainly. What reference does Mr. Shuttle offer, may I ask?'

'Dollars. He seems disposed to accept any reasonable terms for rent and security.'

'Then I should say snap, sir. There are two or three big sales coming on in the next month—bad time to sell the furniture.

Recent events make it most unadvisable to offer the house for sale just now, and there's absolutely no chance at all of finding a tenant who would take it on lease. If the house were inhabited for two or three months a great deal of the prejudice against it would be removed, and then if this American gentleman is willing to pay a good high price——'

'It isn't a question of money, Feverell; understand that. I want to get rid of the place, and if it's an advantage to let it to Mr. Shuttle for a few months, it's only fair to make the terms easy. Let him have it, and ask no more than you would care to give yourself.'

'I understand you, Mr. Sherridan. I will call upon the gentleman to-morrow morning —he left his address—and arrange the affair according to your wish.—Good-evening, gentlemen.'

'Now that's knocked off, Dick,' said Jack,

as we left the agent, 'what shall we do with ourselves now we are in this gay city?'

Anything less gay than a back street in Chester on an ordinary evening cannot well be imagined; so I told him I saw nothing there to detain us.

'Don't you, Dick?' said he affectionately, giving a gentle intonation to his voice; 'for me the place is full of pleasant memories. My heart beats quicker when I come into the dear old town—it seems to me that I must see Kitty somewhere between the lodgings and the theatre, trotting along with that sedate, earnest look of hers, her calm eyes ready to flash into light and laughter at the sight of a friend, like still pools when the breeze comes with a glint of sunlight. We'll put up the mare and walk over the old ground again, at any rate.'

We left the trap at the Albion, and strolled silently through the town, Jack perhaps not wishing to betray his feelings further, and I

being somewhat depressed with a sense of guiltiness in allowing this generous friend to foster hopes that I felt sure could never be realized. We strolled up to the theatre, and, finding that an opera company was playing 'Dorothy' there, Jack bought a couple of stalls, and we went in. How familiar every part of the house was to my eyes! Yet how strange to be sitting there in the stalls instead of in my old chair in the orchestra! The opera was not badly played, though the first fiddle set my teeth on edge, but after one act we both agreed we had heard enough.

'It won't do after Kitty,' said Jack.

On Saturday morning we heard from Mr. Feverell that Mr. Shuttle had signed his agreement, paid a deposit as security, and taken possession of the Vicarage; and now it was too late I asked myself whether I ought not to have made some attempt to prevent this result. However, it was done, and no

regrets would make up for my want of forethought.

The Sunday morning post brought a note from Admiral Strong, saying that he and his daughter hoped to see us on Monday to lunch, and also a letter from Kitty, in which the dear girl said :

'I read your letters over and over again, and when they are read I shut my eyes and try to see and hear all you describe, and if I were an artist I think I could paint a faithful picture of the room you admire and the garden where you hear the weir, from the vision that comes before me. I believe I could show more in my picture even than you tell. The hospitable friend, for instance, to whom you refer in such slight, vague, and mysterious terms—I think I could paint him walking beside you along the hollyhock path with a delightful cigar sticking out under a fine, long, golden moustache, and lest the portrait failed to be a speaking one, I could

write underneath "*This is John Vernon Sherridan!*" But why this mystery, dear? Why this silence with regard to one whom it is pleasant to talk about? Because I cannot be his wife must we never even mention his name? Am I still the little Kitty who cried to be left at home when you went to the theatre, that you think it necessary to say nothing about the friend whose society must be your chief pleasure? Indeed, I could cry now, but with vexation, to be considered a child when I feel myself to be such a staid and reasonable woman. Faith! ye don't know the power of strength that I have, or ye wouldn't be treating me this way at all.'

Further on she wrote: 'We are doing such good business that our stay here is likely to be prolonged. I am studying Lydia Languish for Monday week, when the "Rivals" is to be put up. Good as the part is, I cannot get up any real enthusiasm in it. I do not feel that I *must* play it, nor that pitapat,

nervous, delightful energy that I felt in a part which, perhaps, you would not like me to allude to. Do tell me, dear, if *your* friend is writing another play. I would give ten years of my life (say the eighth ten) to know all that you do *not* tell me.'

The whole letter was written in such a buoyant spirit, and indicated such a cheerful resignation to her lot, that I thought it advisable to hand it over to Jack. He had given the letter to me, recognising the writer by the address, with a hungry, envious look in his eyes, like a poor famished creature offering a tempting dish denied to him, and he took it from me with an eager delight.

'My poor friend,' thought I, 'you will find little enough in that to satisfy your cravings.'

'You see how reasonable she is,' I said, as he turned over the second page.

'So much the better,' cried he with joy; 'the more reasonable she is, the less likely is

it that she will stick to her unreasonable scruples.'

He read the letter through to the end, and then, turning to me, his face aglow with happiness, said:

'Dick, I've the greatest mind in the world to run over to Dublin this very day.'

'Great heavens, Jack!' I exclaimed, horrified by the result of my ill-considered action, 'you cannot possibly do that;' and, thinking of no better reason to deter him, I added: 'Remember, we are engaged to lunch with Admiral Strong to-morrow.'

'Ten thousand engagements should not hold me if I were only sure of that which this letter bids me believe.'

'If it makes you believe that Kitty's resolution wavers, I have done a wrong thing, Jack, to show you the letter. For I *know* she will never be your wife.'

He regarded me fixedly, seeing that I was terribly in earnest, and then hope again

predominating over the fear I had raised, he said cheerfully :

'Well, time will show. But, hang their good business! there's another week or two to wait.'

Again I asked myself if in common honesty I ought not to tell him what I knew about Kitty's father, rather than suffer him to cherish illusions that must be destroyed. But the possibility that I had deceived myself, and that Admiral Strong had really discovered the thief who had murdered and robbed the Vicar, deterred me.

'A few days' delay can do no great harm,' said I to myself. 'It will be time enough to confess all when I am convinced that the Admiral's suspicions do not clear Kitty's father.'

I could give my mind to nothing from that moment till the next morning when we were fairly on the road to The Cedars.

CHAPTER XXV.

STRANGE VISITORS AT THE CEDARS.

We took out our valises, and little Jimmy drove off with the trap as Admiral Strong himself opened the gate of The Cedars to us.

The old gentleman greeted Jack with every mark of satisfaction, and, shaking my hand cordially, he said:

'I'm particularly pleased to see you also, Mr. Holderness' (it was the very first time he had addressed me by my proper name); 'and the more so because I perceived you accepted the invitation with no great relish—which was natural enough, seeing that we haven't rubbed together long enough to wear off our

corners. If you'll believe me,' he added, turning to Jack, 'it was five years before your grandfather and I ever spoke a civil word to each other—five years of continual warfare, you may say—and by the end of that time we deemed ourselves such natural enemies that we agreed to build up a brick wall in place of the open fence that divided my paddock from his orchard, in order that we might not be unnecessarily plagued with the sight of each other. It was the first time that we had ever been in accord upon anything, and you may imagine the results.'

'The brick wall was not built,' said Jack.

'It was not, and thenceforward we were the best friends in the world. For, you see, we had found out all that was detestable in each other's character, and every discovery after that was to our common advantage. The moral of which is, sir,' said he, turning to me, 'that, having seen me at my worst, I hope you may find something

now in old Jo Strong to make your visit in his quarters agreeable.'

I replied to this civil speech by telling him as bluntly as I could that I preferred his society to none at all, and that I hoped by conforming to each other's humour we should in time arrive at a happy mean between rudeness on the one hand and servility on the other.

'We've made a good beginning, at any rate,' said he with a laugh; 'and now we've dipped our ensigns we need trouble ourselves no more on questions of etiquette. Tell me, Mr. Jack, who the dickens is this fellow you've given me for a neighbour?'

'You must have seen him the other day when he drove up to my place with Mr. Shepherd.'

'I like him none the better for that, nor for his being a millionaire, neither, as I'm told he is. Have you known him long?'

Jack briefly related what had passed at our

interview, and explained the conditions on which the Vicarage had been let to Mr. Shuttle.

'Well,' said the Admiral, 'it may be all right, but he's too thick with Shepherd to please me, and I wish that party-wall had been run up at the bottom of my paddock, and coped with broken bottles into the bargain. Did they say they had struck up an acquaintance on the day they came to you?'

'That is what I understood.'

'Then I don't believe it. Why, Shepherd, I am told, hasn't left him since he came to the house on Friday night. They're living together there like a couple of—brothers.'

'Surely, sir,' I ventured to observe, 'you have no reason to doubt this American gentleman's honesty because of his intimacy with the Rev. Mr. Shepherd?'

'I am not aware, sir,' returned the Admiral sternly, 'that I said a word about the

honesty of either one or t'other. Without calling your neighbour a horse-thief, you may wish to keep him on the other side of a brick wall, I hope.'

We now approached the house, a solid, square red-brick building of the Queen Anne style, but more cheerful than the Vicarage by being more open, and the neatly kept lawn in front having a bright border of flowers about it. Up to this we had met no one but the Admiral; but in passing one of the open windows we heard men's voices and a loud laugh, which caused the old gentleman to cast an uneasy glance that way and quicken his pace, as I thought.

Obviously there was company staying in the house, and I foresaw that the difficulty would be consequently greater of fixing upon the one suspected by the Admiral.

He led us through the hall, which was tastefully decorated with flowers and ferns, and up the wide stairs. In an angle of the

broad landing hung an ensign, and more flowers were arranged beneath it.

'Trophies of the past and present,' said I.

'Yes,' he replied, 'and there's a corner there with nothing in it which is woefully suggestive of the future. We're vastly fond of flowers, as you see,' said he to Jack. 'They are Nell's delight, and it's my chief pleasure to grow 'em for her. It's an odd taste for an old sea-dog like me, but I don't know how I should get on without 'em.'

He took us to our rooms, which communicated, and having assured himself that we had everything necessary for our comfort, he left us.

'The poor old chap seems to be in trouble, Dick,' said Jack, coming into my room as I was brushing up. 'I'm afraid he has guests less welcome than we.'

'That's not to be wondered at,' I replied, 'if, as he led us to expect, we are to find

here the man he suspects of having stolen the will.'

'There's something else, I fear. We shall see.—Come on, Dick.'

The symptoms of uneasiness were still more obvious in the Admiral's face as, coming from a side room, he met us at the foot of the stairs; and the expression of subdued irritation and constraint only disappeared when we went out into the garden, and he caught sight of his daughter Helen. She was seated in the shadow of the cedar, beside a thin, bent little old lady, and, hearing our voices, she rose and came to meet us.

'My Nell,' said the Admiral, introducing her to us with a touch of pride and fondness in his voice.

And indeed the old gentleman had reason to be proud of her, for besides being strikingly handsome, she had an open, frank, and amiable expression in her face that made you like her at once. She gave us her hand with

a few cordial words of greeting, looking us straight in the face. A pink sunshade threw colour upon her cheek; nevertheless, as our eyes met I detected in hers the signs which I had seen more than once in my dear Kitty's after crying. She led us to the bent old lady, whom she introduced as Miss Forsyth, and in her wrinkled face, too, there was the unmistakable trace of tears. The gentlemen were not in sight. 'Certainly there must be something amiss in the house,' said I to myself. And the trouble seemed to extend even to the servants, for the girl who came to announce lunch seemed scared, and spoke in a tone as though she feared to be heard.

'Now,' thought I, as I gave my arm to Miss Forsyth, 'we shall see if the rest of the visitors are in the same condition.' But on entering the dining-room I perceived to my astonishment that covers were laid for five only.

'We hoped to give you the company of

two old friends—Colonel Dysart and his brother,' said the Admiral, as we seated ourselves; 'but at the last moment circumstances upset the arrangement.'

This explained the absence of the two gentlemen whose voices we heard on our arrival, and it was evident, by the look of displeasure on the Admiral's face, and a certain embarrassment on the part of his daughter and Miss Forsyth, that the circumstances he referred to were of an unpleasant character. It seemed to me a breach of good manners for them to leave in this unceremonious manner immediately on our arrival, and I said to myself that if the Colonel and his brother were men of that sort we could enjoy ourselves quite as much without their society as with it. And, indeed, we got on very well, thanks chiefly to Jack's admirable tact and good nature, which were never so active as when surrounding conditions tended to depress his

friends. Without the slightest apparent effort he found interesting subjects of conversation which served rather to draw us out than to display his own ability as a talker, though what he said was always bright and mirthful. Under these pleasant influences our constraint wore away; our repast, which had threatened to be a dismal business, passed off in gaiety, we ate heartily and laughed heartily, and quite lost sight of Black Care, which undoubtedly haunted the house.

After lunch we passed into the drawing-room, where the first thing that attracted Jack's attention was a beautifully finished little model of Admiral Strong's gun, which stood on a side-table.

'Ah, this,' said Jack earnestly, 'is what I wanted to see. Every step in the direction of national defence is a national gain.'

'What! Mr. Jack,' cried the Admiral, 'you can give a thought to such matters as that!'

'I should be a careless fool if I didn't; for surely the most important thing when one has a happy home is to know how to keep it.'

'Well, hang me!' exclaimed the Admiral, forgetting the presence of the ladies for the first time, as he grasped Jack's hand and gave him a clap on the shoulder; 'hang me if you're not a man after my own heart! It's refreshing to find a man who can think seriously upon serious matters when the whole nation seems utterly indifferent to its own welfare. Was there ever such a condition of affairs in this country as exists now? I've been reading old Pepys' diary, and I verily believe our defences are in a more rotten state than they were in his time. For here, as I know, are bribery and corruption in one department which slips millions into the pockets of rascals who get ships afloat which were better left on the stocks; guns that burst after a couple of rounds, and the like; and this Government, which calls itself

Tory, is so careless of our interests that it actually promotes a captain who has twice run his ship aground, and winks at a pair of similar loggerheads who worry their crews into mutiny. And is the army better? Not a whit that I can see, for gunlocks jamb and bayonets double up, and two crack regiments revolt because their officers think more of dawdling about at clubs and racecourses than keeping their men in good discipline. And who cares? Why, not one man in the million, so far as I can judge by the feeble outcry that is raised against these notorious abuses.'

'The ammunition is introduced here,' Jack observed, to give a turn to the Admiral's thoughts, which were working him up into a fury.

'You're right, Jack; but come out with me into the orchard; I have a working model there, and you shall see it in action.'

'You will be careful, won't you, dear?' said his daughter in a tone of anxiety.

'Ay, ay, Nell. I've used none but blank cartridges since we had the ill-luck to bring down the top of the church-spire.—Are you for music, Holderness?' he asked, going towards the door with his arm linked in Jack's.

'Yes, sir,' said I; 'but here's an instrument that I prefer to yours;' and I seated myself before the piano, which had been tempting me from the moment I entered the room. It was a superb instrument, a grand, and one of Erard's best. 'The world is better and happier for such inventions as this,' thought I, as I ran my fingers over it. Then I rose and begged Miss Strong to play to me.

'I want you to hear me play,' she said gravely; and, seating herself, she took up the first piece of music that came to her hand and played it to me.

'Admirable!' said I.

She nodded and smiled without taking her fingers from the keys, and then went through one of Beethoven's sonatas from memory.

'Excellent!' said I; 'that andante movement again, please.'

She repeated the movement, and at my request played one or two fugues from a book of Bach that I had caught sight of. She listened quietly to my praise of her performance, and then, turning on the stool and facing me, she said:

'Now tell me, Mr. Holderness, if you were going to give a concert, would you engage me to play a solo?'

She spoke so earnestly, and with such evident desire to know the truth, that I could not tell her a direct falsehood even to spare her pain.

'Well,' said I, 'nowadays one expects so much of a pianiste.'

'And there is so much talent of a higher order than mine?'

'I didn't say that,' said I.

'But I think you meant it,' said she, smiling. 'And it is my opinion; but it's so hard to

know one's self when one's friends are too kind.'

'After all, the public is a better judge of its own requirements than a critic.'

'Ah, if I had thought of that,' said she, looking beyond me significantly with a little laugh, 'I might have spared the critic.'

Turning round to see what had suggested this observation, I perceived that Miss Forsyth had fallen asleep.

'Are you anxious to play in public?' I asked presently.

'No. I suppose one must be ambitious to attain any real position in art. And I am not. Only it seemed to me a more pleasant way of gaining a living than by teaching music to dull children.'

She went on to question me about professional matters and the payment of musicians, scarcely disguising the fact that she foresaw the necessity of earning money in this way. From musicians our discussion turned to

actors, and she asked many questions about Kitty, whom she had seen play in 'The Bluestocking,' and whose private character her father had described with so much admiration.

'I wish she were here,' said she, and this wish I heartily reciprocated, for it seemed to me that no two young women were better suited to each other than these by their unaffected candour, amiability, and the healthy tone of their dispositions.

My thoughts were still dwelling on my dear Kitty, when a terrible explosion in the rear of the house caused the windows to shake and Miss Forsyth to wake with a cry of terror.

'It's papa's gun,' said Miss Strong with comparative calm, as she crossed the room to allay Miss Forsyth's fears. 'I dare say it's only something burst; but please, Mr. Holderness, see if papa and Mr. Sherridan are quite safe.'

I ran out of the house, and, finding my way

by the smell of powder and the column of smoke that hung over some distant trees, I reached the orchard, where to my great relief I saw Jack and the Admiral moving about in the gray smoke that rolled towards me, with their proper number of limbs.

'What's the matter?' I asked, panting for breath, as I came up to Jack, who, taking up his position at a respectful distance from the machine-gun, was standing with his hands in his pockets gravely regarding the Admiral.

'Nothing much,' said he quietly; 'better not go nearer, old man; it isn't all over yet.'

I looked with blinking eyes, in anticipation of another explosion, towards the Admiral, who was standing by his gun, an instrument that looked like a wheel without a rim. Jack explained that the spokes revolved round the hub, which served as a magazine, and that in passing a given point the cartridges dropped

into the revolving barrels, and should explode in the direction of the enemy; but in consequence of some derangement of the mechanism all the barrels had been fired at once, which, as he remarked, would have made it as unpleasant for friends in the rear of the gun as for foes in the front. At this moment the undaunted Admiral turned a handle, and the same result was produced, all the barrels discharging at once in a revolving circle like a gigantic catherine-wheel. I waited just long enough to assure myself that the Admiral was still whole, and then hastened back to the house to assure the ladies that no harm had happened.

On turning the angle of the garden-path suddenly, I ran up against a couple of gentlemen, who with equal haste were going towards the orchard. I apologized, but without a word in response they hurried on, leaving me there, shaken and dumfoundered. It was obvious to me that Colonel Dysart and

his brother had not left The Cedars, for unquestionably they had just come from the house.

I went into the drawing-room and explained to the ladies what had happened in the orchard; but my thoughts were continually running upon the mystery of these two incomprehensible gentlemen. When we were in our rooms dressing for dinner, I told Jack about this encounter.

'Yes,' said he quietly, 'they came down to the field. I saw them.'

'But don't you find something very mysterious in this affair?' I asked; 'doesn't it strike you that their behaviour is rather unbecoming in her Majesty's officers?'

Jack burst into laughter. 'Well,' said he, when his mirth subsided, 'I suppose they are her Majesty's officers, though I doubt if Colonel Dysart would care to be lumped in the same category with these two fellows. Why, you poor old innocent Dick!' he

continued, looking at me incredulously, 'can't you see what's the matter here?'

'Not a bit.'

'Why, there's an execution in the house, and the fellows who nearly knocked you off your pins are sheriff's officers.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ADMIRAL'S SUSPICIONS AND JACK'S.

The doubt which lingered in my mind as to the accuracy of Jack's explanation was dispelled by the Admiral himself that night. The ladies had left us, and we three men were settling down in the Admiral's snuggery to the enjoyment of our pipes and grog, when a burst of rude laughter came to our ears from the other side of the hall. Setting down his glass with a look of vexation, the Admiral glanced sharply at us, and, seeing no surprise in our faces, he shook his silvery curls ruefully, and said:

'I see it's no good trying to keep you in

the dark any longer, and I don't know why I should, neither, as the cat must come out of the bag sooner or later. Besides which, I feel that I must open my heart to you, or you'll take it I've but little faith in your friendship. Well, lads, there's a couple of bumbailiffs in the house, and that's the long and short of it.'

Jack nodded, and the old gentleman continued:

'They got into the place before I was up, and presented me with their d——d papers at the foot of the stairs out there when I came down. There was time to send off a despatch to Dysart in London telling him not to come, but I could find no means of sending a note to you at nine miles' distance.'

'I'm glad of it,' said Jack; 'but surely it would have been simpler to get the fellows out of the house at once.'

'To be sure, that was the notion that struck me at first; but, with women about,

what sort of a fight could I have made of it single-handed ?'

We both laugh d heartily at the Admiral's idea of ejecting the officers in this summary fashion ; but he, who regarded the matter from a more serious point of view, requested to know what means we should have employed in the circumstances, to which Jack replied that he should have discharged the debt for which the execution was put in.

'That's easier said than done, Mr. Jack,' said the Admiral, 'when the debt is over a couple of hundreds and you can't scrape up fifty.'

'You won't deny me the common privilege of a friend, I hope,' said Jack.

'I know what you mean, Jack—you'd let me have the money. I know that. But I'm resolved to let the law take its course, as these fellows say.'

'You have to think of your daughter.'

'Ay, ay—I don't want to be reminded of

that; and then there's that poor old maid, Miss Forsyth, without a penny in the world or a friend save us. I have to think of her whenever I cast my eye that way. Nell and I can manage to rough it, but the Lord only knows if there'll be enough left when the place is sold up to keep the old lady out of the workhouse.'

'But you will let her suffer rather than take a couple of hundred from my hands,' said Jack, with a touch of contempt in his voice.

'A couple of hundred won't save the ship.'

'A couple of thousand, then — what is necessary.'

'No, Jack; when it comes to the pinch you will do something for Miss Forsyth. But independence is more to me than ease and comfort, and my Nell's of the same mind.'

Jack turned in his chair impatiently, sending out great puffs of smoke.

'But, my dear sir,' I ventured to say,

'could you not accept something as a loan?'

'No,' replied the Admiral doggedly, stretching out his short legs and thrusting his hands deep in his pockets; 'I've had enough of loans. I begin to see that it's little better than getting money under false pretences.'

'But not when you can give me some sort of security; and if, as you let us know the other day, you are convinced that the will which entitled you to this money exists——'

'I'm more sure than ever that it exists; but I'm almost equally sure that it will be destroyed before we ever get a glimpse of it.'

He was silent for a couple of minutes; then, changing his attitude, he pushed the spirit-case and tobacco-jar aside to make room for his arms on the table, and, leaning forward, he addressed Jack.

'You shall understand me, lad,' said he.

'Obstinate I may be, and shall be, in guarding my independence. That's a matter that concerns myself. But, see, I'll show you that it is not mere pig-headed perversity which makes me unyielding in this affair of a loan. There's a man not a hundred miles from this room who has me under his thumb. At least, this is *his* opinion. He's bought up a lot of bills which I put into circulation when I felt sure my gun was going to bring me a fortune. He bought them without my knowledge to get me out of difficulties—spare me humiliation and pain. That's how he puts it, but the rascal's got a bigger motive than that. He's after my Nell,' with an angry thump on the table; 'and he hopes to frighten her into accepting his confounded hand by the prospect of bringing me to beggary through the bills he holds.'

'He must be a wealthy man.'

'Not a bit of it; according to his own showing he's as poor as a church mouse.'

'Then his affection should be disinterested, since he knows that your daughter has no fortune, and that you are deeply in debt.'

'It looks like that, to be sure, and that's the aspect he wishes to put on it. But mark this, lad, that man has your grandfather's will, and if he could make Nell his wife it wouldn't be long before he produced it, and he'd secure his share of the fortune by the bills he holds. If he doesn't get Nell, he'll destroy the will, and drain my blood to the last drop. He shall do it and be d——d to him. But not a drop shall he get that isn't mine.'

'When did he buy up the bills?' asked Jack.

'I can't tell you. I heard nothing about them till last week. He *says* he bought them, but I don't believe that. It's more likely your grandfather bought them up, and this villain found them with the will.'

'Of course you have no proof that he has the will.'

'None but what the rascal has furnished in the hints he has dared to drop in talking to Nell. But there's nothing in them to catch hold of—a slippery, cunning rascal!'

'Is that Miss Strong's opinion?'

'Yes. Thank God, Nell loathes him as fully as I do, and rather than be his wife she would suffer all the misery that poverty can bring, and more.'

'Has she told him so?'

'No; he hasn't given her the chance. He's too sly for that. He'll not give me the excuse for kicking him out into the street. He waits and watches, like some cat at the hole of a mouse. He knows the straits we're in, and bides his time till we've felt the prick of poverty and the need of money. There,' said he with a groan, as he dropped back in his chair, 'I've told you all I mean to tell. You understand my position, and will plague me no more with your offers of help. And now, for mercy's sake, sing us a comic song,

Holderness, or let's turn to spin yarns to get the taste of this stuff out of our mouths.'

* * * * *

'Well, Jack,' said I, when we were alone in our rooms, 'what do you make of the Admiral's suspicions?'

'They confirm mine,' he replied. 'Indeed, I can't see any other deduction to be drawn from the facts.'

'And who is the man not a hundred miles from this room?'

'The curate, beyond a doubt.'

'You believe he murdered your grandfather?'

'I don't say that. I don't think it. His character is not that of a murderer. I should say he lacked the physical courage to commit a great crime. But the more despicable crime, compassed by craft and perpetrated without risk, is what he certainly might be guilty of—judging his character, of course, from the Admiral's evidence. See the

subtlety of the man: by marrying Miss Strong he precludes exposure; for his daughter's sake the Admiral would hush up what suspicions might be provoked by the production of the will later on. No; I believe that he got a stronger man to do the murder, and is sharing the profits with that man.'

'And who,' I asked, with creeping trepidation—'who do you think that man is?'

'The man who calls himself Shuttle. I feel certain that man is not an American; I only doubted it before. They're accomplices, those two, I'd bet anything upon it.'

Now that my suspicions were supported by the opinion of a man whose knowledge of character and quick perception commanded respect, I could no longer sustain a hope of Yorke's innocence. 'It's all too true,' I said to myself, 'my poor Kitty can never marry Jack.'

'If we could only force the rascal's hand,'

Jack murmured reflectively as he wound his watch.

'Jack,' said I, 'you can do that, and at the same time dispose of your grandfather's fortune in the way he would have it disposed.'

'How?' he asked, looking at me in astonishment.

'By making Miss Strong your wife.'

'You are determined that I am not to marry Kitty,' said he with a smile of derision, and yet with a little quiver of the lips that betrayed his wavering confidence.

'Kitty will never be your wife,' I said, my voice breaking down under the emotion I felt. Then I pointed out Miss Strong's advantages, and the equality which fitted them to be husband and wife. And again I pointed out the means of overcoming the money difficulty by this arrangement.

'I could settle that business in another way,' said he quietly. 'I might buy that famous gun.'

'And ruin yourself!' I exclaimed, 'perhaps do yourself a mortal injury!'

'I should only injure myself, at any rate,' said he. 'Whereas if I married a girl without love I might ruin her happiness for life and my own as well. Still,' he added, looking at the light with half-closed eyes and a smile taking the place of grave reflection, 'I will think of it, Dick. Good-night.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

MY IRRATIONAL JEALOUSY, AND WHAT IT LED TO.

When I woke the next morning I found Jack by my bedside fastening his cuff-studs.

'Don't be alarmed, Dick,' said he, with a laugh at my waking bewilderment; 'it isn't late. I have a little bit of business to do before breakfast. Do you remember the address Feverell gave us of his private residence, where he might be found out of office-hours?'

'Edward Street.'

'Ah, that's it; couldn't remember the name. We must get those fellows out of the house.'

'What! the curate and Mr. Shuttle?'

'No, the officers down below. Feverell will know how to do it. Of course you won't say a word to old Strong about it.'

I dropped off to sleep when he was gone, for I had lain awake the greater part of the night thinking about Kitty and her father, and did not wake again till the servant brought the hot water to my door. It was past eight.

As I glanced out of window in pulling up the blind, my eye fell upon Miss Strong and Jack, who were strolling across the lawn. He was removing the thorns from a rosebud, and she, with her head bent down, was smiling at something he said to her. He offered the rose, and she took it with a graceful inclination of the head, again smiling as he spoke; then they passed out of my range of vision. This trifling incident caused me to sit down on the side of my bed and reflect with a painful sinking at my heart. Remem-

bering our parting words overnight, I asked myself if Jack had come to the conclusion that it was best to act on my advice. He had said, 'I will think of it;' was this the result of his meditation? Had my insistence prevailed? Was he convinced at last that Kitty could not be his wife, that their difference of condition was an unsurpassable barrier to a happy union? Had he perceived that Miss Strong would be a more suitable wife? Had he taken the resolution to engage himself to her, that he might not be tempted by any recurring hope to overcome Kitty's well-founded scruples? I felt that if these questions were answered in the affirmative I ought to experience nothing but satisfaction, for this course was the one I had advised him to take—the one which I had considered best for all concerned; nevertheless, I was wretched, not only because of Kitty's loss, but because this sudden departure betokened a want of steadfastness in

Jack's character which overthrew the admiration I had hitherto felt for him.

'And yet,' I said to myself, as I rose and began to dress, 'this sudden step is not inconsistent with his vigorous nature. The moment a strong man is convinced that a thing should be done, he does it. From his rising so early to seek Feverell, it is clear that he thought the matter out last night, and came to a definite decision as to what he must do at once. Still, that he should pick flowers for *her* bosom and whisper love in *her* ear so soon!' That thought exasperated me, for the fact is I was as jealous as Kitty herself might have been in my place.

I think my looks must have betrayed my feelings to Jack, who was an excellent physiognomist, when we met at the breakfast-table. I felt that my eyes had a stony look in them, that the smile with which I greeted Miss Strong was forced, and that my features were pinched and unpleasant with an

assumed expression of complacency. And I believe also he divined the cause of my discomfort, and maliciously provoked it by his attentions to Miss Strong. It was as if he had said to himself, 'Oh, you don't want me to marry Kitty! Eh, Dick? Well, we will see how you would like me to marry someone else,' and, with a view to exasperating me, he made himself more lively and agreeable than ever to others, and especially to Miss Strong.

As we rose from the table, Jack, declaring he must run over to the mill for letters, which he had neglected to have forwarded, asked if a vehicle could be hired in the village.

'Why, there's the fly at the Crown that I drove over to Sunningham in the day I dropped in upon you,' said the Admiral; 'but look you, Mr. Jack, as we shan't have any too much of your company, I see no reason why we shouldn't all go with you.' Miss Strong's face flushed with pleasure. 'Though

to be sure,' he added, 'twill be a tight fit for five.'

I begged them to leave me at home, as I had an important letter or two to write; and, after some expostulation, this arrangement was agreed to, for which I was heartily thankful, knowing that I should have been silent and ill at ease all the time. For it seemed to me, in my absurdly jealous condition, that Jack had planned this excursion on purpose to show Miss Strong the home he could offer her; and I remembered that it was in little trips of this kind that he had won poor Kitty's heart. A maid was sent round to the Crown to order the fly, which came to the gate about half an hour after, and the whole party went off, leaving me grinning in the road with a torment in my heart.

And here, to avoid complications, it will be best to tell what really had passed between Jack and Miss Strong before breakfast in that *tête-à-tête* which had so upset me, the

particulars of which I learnt from them later on.

Returning to The Cedars from his call on Mr. Feverell, Jack met Miss Strong in the garden, where she was gathering flowers for the breakfast-table.

'Oh, my flowers!' said Miss Strong with a sigh, as they walked slowly along; 'what shall I do without them?'

'What will they do without you?' asked Jack.

'Don't tell me that they will pine and die, or I shall cease to think you quite sincere, Mr. Sherridan.'

'Then we will change the subject, for I wish you to believe me perfectly sincere.'

'May I ask why you value my esteem so highly?'

'Because without esteem you cannot regard me as a friend, and friendship alone can justify me in speaking to you as I would.'

'Oh, the friendship exists! We are not mere acquaintances of a day. Remember, I knew your grandfather from childhood, and since his death you have taken at least a part of the place he held in our affections. You know that my father conceals nothing from me. It is no secret that you would give us half your fortune.'

'I wish your kind feeling had not been won so cheaply.'

'You think our sensibility is overstrained; but indeed it is not. Put yourself in my father's place, in mine—would you, having no greater right than we to your grandfather's fortune, accept so many thousand pounds as a gift from us? No, I am sure you would not. But this is not the subject you wished to speak to me so freely about.'

'They are related,' said Jack; and then he told her the substance of our conversation with her father the night before, adding, in conclusion: 'Your father gave no name, but

his indication and my suspicions point to Crawley Shepherd as the common enemy. The question is, how are we to beat the rascal at his game ?'

'Tricksters are difficult for honest players to beat, I fear,' said she.

'Yes; but it is not always the subtlest that wins. Now, Holderness made a suggestion last night that might lead to something.'

'Mr. Holderness !' exclaimed Miss Strong in surprise.

'Strength to confound the enemy out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,' observed the irreverent young man. 'Certainly the means he proposed would forestall Mr. Crawley and dispose of this vexatious pecuniary question.'

'Pray tell me what he has proposed.'

'That I should marry you myself.'

'Ah !' exclaimed Miss Strong, drawing herself up with indignation, as I can readily imagine, at this crude announcement, 'Mr.

Holderness is positively too good. And do you share the opinion he seems to entertain, that you have only to throw me your handkerchief to be accepted ?'

'I have so little intention of marrying that I confess I gave that side of the question no consideration. But it struck me that if we could lead Mr. Crawley to suppose that I have intentions of that kind the result might be advantageous. Jealous people lose their heads, become vindictive, and entertain the basest suspicions. I should like to see the Rev. Crawley Shepherd under the influence of jealousy. I cannot imagine that man letting fury get the better of him, but he might say something to justify my boxing his ears. It might hasten the development of his plans; he would possibly make you an offer of marriage, and on being refused would certainly lay the flattering unction to his wounded feelings that his poverty was the cause, and that you gave the preference to

me because of my fortune. Then I think the spirit of vengeance would lead him to produce the will to ruin my fortunes and blight my happiness.'

'Why, it's an act in a comedy!' cried Miss Strong, laughing; 'no one but a writer of plays could have imagined such a dénouement.'

'The question is, as in all comedies, is it actable?'

'That depends, I should say, upon whether the principal actor is satisfied with his rôle,' replied Miss Strong naïvely, with a blush and a smile.

'The actor must be difficult to please who has no greater task than to express admiration for Miss Strong.'

'And since it is understood that he has no object more serious in view than that of losing his fortune,' she retorted, with gentle irony.

'At any rate, we may give the idea a trial;

and as I hear Holderness pulling up his blind we will begin at once. His proposal was less sincere than he believed it, I feel sure, and we shall judge of our ability to play our parts by the effect we find in his tell-tale face at breakfast. Allow me to offer you this rose to add to your collection.'

'Oh, Mr. Sherridan!' she said, entering into the part at once, with what ability I have already shown by my confession.

* * * * *

If I had only known this, how I should have chuckled to observe the delicate solicitude with which Jack in passing the Vicarage arranged the dust-cloak upon Miss Strong's shoulders (on the chance of being seen by the observant curate); and it was this attention, with her simpering smile of acknowledgment, that made my blood boil with jealous wrath.

In that condition it was impossible to write my letter to Kitty. I had no gentle thoughts to make a letter pleasant to the receiver, and,

like most embittered men, my dearest wish was to make someone as wretched as myself.

'If I could only see Yorke,' said I to myself, 'I'd give it to him. He should know what he has brought about by his wickedness, and if he has any real feeling for his daughter I would make him suffer keenly for this.'

And, with the chance of seeing him in the Vicarage grounds and putting my desire into execution, I made for the paddock, and looked into the adjoining orchard. No one was in sight, but I lingered there, uncovering the Admiral's gun and making a pretence of examining its mechanism. Suddenly, when I least expected it, I heard a voice exclaim in an accent of delight and surprise :

'Oh, good-morning, my deah Mr. Holderness. I thought you were gone with that merry party for a little jaunt.'

Mr. Crawley Shepherd was leaning over the rails that divided the two grounds, with that beaming, oily face of his and sickly

smile. He was alone. However, I promised myself the pleasure of making him smart if I couldn't get at Yorke.

'I heard Miss Strong's pretty laugh,' he continued in his chirpy, cheerful way, as he laid his flabby hand in mine, 'and I was just in time to see deah Mr. Sherridan's fine, handsome physiognomy. I knew you were heah,' he added, shaking his finger at me in the amiable tone of reproof which an indulgent teacher employs with a naughty boy; 'but I doubt if you gave yourself the trouble to call at Rose Cottage to see me.'

'If I had,' said I, 'I should not have found you there.'

'That is true. I have been heah since Friday, for deah Mr. Shuttle is so helpless and lonely, and it is *such* a satisfaction to be of use to my fellow-creatures. He has gone to London to-day on business, and left me to take charge of the house in his absence, or I would ask you to go for a nice little walk with

me, as you are all alone. But I dare say you will not be alone long.'

'I think they will return to late lunch; Mr. Sherridan has taken Miss Strong to see his house.'

'Hoh!' he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows, his smile growing a little more bilious. 'Deah old place, is it not?'

'Yes, but dull if one had to live there alone.'

'That is very true; but Mr. Sherridan will not live alone long, I am sure. I remember little Miss Kitty,' he said, with a very arch shake of his head.

'Her engagement with Mr. Sherridan is quite broken off,' said I, with the hope that he would communicate the fact to Yorke when he returned. 'However, as you say, he is not likely to live alone long on that account.'

'Hoh!' Mr. Shepherd's eyes grew rounder and more protuberant than ever,

and the smile almost departed from his face. 'And do you really think he has already disposed of his affections elsewhere?'

'Well, it looks uncommonly like it,' said I, with a grin of vindictive pleasure at the evident discomfort of the curate. 'In fact, I feel sure that he intends to marry Miss Strong. She is lively, accomplished, amiable apparently, and, beyond all doubt, exceedingly handsome.' He nodded melancholy assent to each of these recommendations. 'And I dare say he looks upon it as a matter of duty to bestow the fortune that has fallen in his hands according to the will which it seems his grandfather intended to execute. Though whether that is likely to enrich her remains to be seen.'

'Why, what do you mean, my deah Mr. Holderness?' he asked, with nothing left of his habitual smile but the creases it had worn in his cheek.

'He spoke to me seriously last night of

investing his money in that precious gun,' said I, with a nod at the machine.

'Oh, deah, deah, deah! Such a possibility crossed my mind when I saw him yesterday exercising that terrible engine of destruction.'

'You may well call it that,' said I, with another savage grin inspired by his look of terror; 'but it's more likely to destroy a fine fortune than the enemies of our country, from what I observed.'

'It cost sixty-five pounds to repair the injury done to the church-spire by that horrid instrument.'

'Yes; the Admiral boasts that he can fire off ten pounds' worth of ammunition in ten minutes. No fortune can stand such a drain as that upon it. It's brought the Admiral to such a state of insolvency that he cannot keep the brokers out of his house.'

'I hear that they are in possession.'

'And there they would stay if Mr. Sherri-

dan had not instructed his agent to get them out. Ah, well, I only hope he may find a friend to do as much for him when that infernal gun has made smoke of his money.'

'That magnificent fortune!' he exclaimed, holding up his clammy hands in unfeigned horror; 'the treasure which I helped the deah Vicah, my lamented mastah, to store up, all to be thrown away and scattahd like chaff before the wind!'

'To the advantage of nobody.'

'Nay, to the positive *dis*-advantage of many worthy souls, and the ruin of the unoffending'—holding on to the rail, he bent forward at each division of his sentence to give emphasis to his words—'for a man not content with squandering his substance plunges into debt before he checks his downward careah. And what is to become of the unfortunate creditors?'

'Why, to be sure, they will have to whistle for their money,' said I, chuckling to think

how he would be left with those bills in his hands, which he had bought or stolen.

'The deah Vicah's fears were only too well grounded, and were he living now he would find that my misgivings with regard to his misguided grandson were substantially based like a house set on a rock. And do you really think, my deah Mr. Holderness, that Miss Strong will accept this headstrong and thriftless young man for her husband?'

'That's as clear as day,' said I, 'for what other chance is she likely to get when her father's estate is sold up and they are thrown on their own resources? Is it probable that any girl in her position would refuse a husband with such a fortune?'

'But if this fortune is to be invested in such an enterprise as that!' with a most despairing look at the gun.

'Ah, she's got to find that out,' said I. 'You can't expect foresight in a young lady of her age.'

'Would it not be advisable to warn her, my dear Mr. Holderness?' he asked, the sweet persuasive smile returning to his face.

'It's not for me to do that. In fact, sir,' said I, with a qualm lest this disclosure of mine should come round to the Admiral's ears, 'I'm afraid my mortification has led me to say too much already.'

A ring at the bell gave me an excuse to leave him; and I was not sorry to afford him the opportunity of meditating on the matter we had discussed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. SINGLETON, THE DETECTIVE, COMES ON THE SCENE.

The bell had been rung by a respectably-dressed young man, looking like a lawyer's clerk, who wished to see the men in possession. The maid-servant came to know what she ought to do in the absence of her master, and as I had reason to believe that the clerk had come to tell the officers that the debt was discharged, I bade her admit him. The result was, as I anticipated, the men left the house with the clerk almost immediately.

I had ample time before Jack's return to recover my equanimity, and get over my un-

reasonable grudge against him. Indeed, I very soon began to see that my jealousy was childish and contemptible, and felt duly ashamed of having given way to it, telling myself that I ought to be pleased that he had taken energetic measures to overcome his feelings for Kitty, and preclude further hope if (as I truly believed) it was impossible for them to marry. And this seemed more positive than ever now that by no twisting of supposition could I explain away the evidence which pointed so conclusively to Yorke's implication in the murder.

So when the party came home all brisk and gay with the pleasure of the excursion, I put on the best face I could to meet them, and, shutting my eyes to the unpleasant side of the affair, looked Jack in the face with returning affection. To tell the truth, as he met my regard with a smile, made up of amusement and kindliness, every bitter reflection went out of my mind, and, warming

towards him, I pressed his hand with that expansion of heart which friends feel after a little rupture.

'The journey was not fruitless,' said he; 'I found a letter for you, Dick.'

I took it, and, seeing it was from Kitty, I slipped it quietly into my pocket, instead of opening it at once, as usual.

'You won't be so greedy as to devour it all alone, surely,' said he in remonstrance; 'you can find a little scrap or two in it for me.'

'Why, Jack,' said I, a little uneasily, fearing to wound him, 'I thought that you might not care to hear any more about Kitty now. I am not blind——'

'Not quite, perhaps; but you're the victim of an optical illusion,' said he, with a hearty laugh. And then he told me of the plot he had concocted with Miss Strong, which I narrated in the last chapter; and all the time I listened my spirits grew lighter and lighter,

though I knew perfectly well that this elation was not a whit more creditable to my common-sense than my previous depression had been, and that logically I ought to deplore his constancy to Kitty.

'Well, well,' said I, when I had heard him out, 'you have taken me in, to be sure; but there's a man vastly more cunning than I pretend to be, who has been hoodwinked as famously;' and then I in turn told him all that had passed between the Rev. Crawley Shepherd and myself.

'This is capital!' he exclaimed, rubbing his hands in delight. 'You have created a splendid part in the plot, and played it the better, I dare say, for being unconscious of it. However, we will not let the action halt. Now that we know the rascal's tender point, we can goad him on to desperation. This afternoon we will burn another five pounds' worth of powder, and if Mr. Crawley Shepherd can listen calmly to the destruction of the money

which he hopes to acquire, he is not the avaricious schemer we take him for.'

Our discussion was interrupted at this juncture by a knock at my door and the entrance of the Admiral, who, confronting me with his feet planted well apart, said:

'Look here, Mr. Squeaker, I find my bum-bailiffs are gone, and it's pretty clear they wouldn't leave me unless they were paid to go. I take it you have been getting at them in my absence.'

'Why, sir, I haven't the means, if I had the will, to discharge your obligations.'

'Maybe,' he retorted, with an artful leer; 'but didn't Mr. Jack in there provide you with the means, telling you to clear the house of these fellows, while he took old Squaretoes (meaning me) out a-driving.'

'I'll take my oath he gave me nothing, nor said anything of the sort,' said I.

'Why, then, this must be another move of that d——d Crawley, of a piece with his

buying up those bills of mine, and much good may they do him! I can't say I see the object of this last manœuvre fairly, which seems more likely to run him ashore than to give him any advantage over me; but I warrant there's some villainy at the bottom of it which an honest man cannot sight. However, I don't care who bleeds for me, so that it be not a friend, so let's go down to lunch and think no more of it.'

Soon after lunch Jack and the Admiral recommenced experiments with the gun, and the afternoon being very warm and bright, Miss Strong, dressed in the lightest and most coquettish style, had a garden-chair carried into the paddock, where she seated herself with a fan on the windward side of the machine, and took a lively interest in the proceedings, which Jack explained to her at length after each explosion. For my own part, I thought it advisable to keep in the background, where I could not be seen from the

Vicarage grounds, lest the curate should suspect collusion, and see through the conspiracy. A glance now and then through the hedge that divided the kitchen-garden from the paddock was enough for me. It was amusing to see how admirably Jack and Miss Strong played their parts—he with all the earnestness in the world pointing out the defects of a burst cartridge, she listening with smiling complacency as she slowly flirted her fan, evidently more interested in him than in the subject of his discourse; but that which gave me real satisfaction was the glimpse of a dusky figure flitting about in the smoke, which was undoubtedly that of the curate, choked out of his hiding-place by a turn of the wind, and trying to find his way through the blinding cloud.

By tightening a screw, Jack, who knew a little of everything, had effected a considerable improvement in the working of the gun, which now, instead of discharging all the barrels at

a volley, fired one only at each revolution of the apparatus; and though this certainly was a great economy of ammunition on each round, it served to lengthen out the agony of the grasping curate, whom I figured in my mind's eye counting shot after shot, and making a mental calculation of the cost to himself of so many hundred cartridges at so much apiece. This, with the picture before him of the beautiful young woman he coveted, doing all in her power to fascinate his rival, must have worked him up into a fever of sordid and jealous exasperation. When the announcement of dinner obliged the Admiral to cease firing for the day, he was as grimy as an engine-driver with the smoke from the gunpowder. Delighted beyond measure with the result of the afternoon's experiments, he declared that with a few more alterations the gun would be perfect, and the nation secure from the danger of occupation by an enemy if only the lethargic War Office could

be induced to take up the arm; and Jack, declaring that these alterations should be made forthwith, went out in the evening and engaged half a dozen smiths to come up to The Cedars the following morning with a view to taking the gun to pieces and overhauling the mechanism.

About ten o'clock the workmen arrived, each furnished with such miscellaneous tools as his limited acquaintance with the work to be done suggested might come in handy. We went down to the field in a body, and then, as there were a few dozen cartridges left, Jack, in order to draw the Rev. Mr. Shepherd's attention to the proceedings, proposed making one or two experiments before dismounting the piece, to which the Admiral, who loved nothing so well as the smell of powder and the roaring of guns, readily assented.

Scarcely a dozen rounds had been fired when I caught sight of Bob Yorke and the

curate coming through the Vicarage orchard towards us.

I noticed at once that there was a change in Yorke's appearance. What it was I could not decide, until, observing that his lip and chin were now perfectly clean-shaven, I remembered that when he came over to the mill-house he wore a moustache and chin tuft. What was the meaning of this? I asked myself. Was he absolutely courting suspicion?

He took no notice of me, but, approaching the gun, regarded it from his side of the railing with a sort of mournful curiosity.

Mr. Shepherd looked harried and careworn; his smile was bilious, as he gave me the tips of his fingers over the rail, and begged to know what these men were going to do.

'But, my deah sir!' he exclaimed, when I had explained Jack's intention, 'those men are only common blacksmiths, quite in-

capable of delicate work. They will rendah the engine utterly worthless.'

'What does it matter?' I asked in a low voice; 'fools and their money, you know, are soon parted; and, one way or the other, Mr. Sherridan is bound to lose every farthing he has.'

For a moment he looked as if he were about to weep; then, suddenly clasping his hands, his features were distorted with a spasm of pain, as another discharge rent the air.

'Say, Mr. Sherridan!' said Yorke, as the smoke cleared away, 'as I hired your residence for a spell of tranquillity, you will oblige me by stating if this kind of thing is of daily occurrence?'

I did not catch Jack's reply, for at that moment the Admiral called me to his side. He held a card in his hand which the maid had brought down from the house.

'Holderness,' said he, 'here's a gentleman

wishes to see me; I don't know the man, and for aught I know he may be but a dun. Will you be good enough to go up and see what he wants? for I've got a word or two to say to this neighbour of mine which may lead to a rather lengthy dispute.'

I took the card, and hastened up to the house. The name, neatly printed on the card, was 'James Singleton,' and the address below was '24, Chancery Lane.'

I found Mr. Singleton in the hall—a young man in a closely-buttoned frock-coat, hat in hand. He had side-whiskers clipped short, but no moustache, a long, thin nose, and a couple of keen gray eyes, deep set. He looked like a clerk or a smart body-servant.

'Admiral Strong?' he inquired, after looking at me.

'No; the Admiral is engaged. He has sent me to inquire your business.'

'It is of a private nature,' he said, dropping his voice.

'I am afraid the Admiral will not see you unless you can give me a more definite indication,' I replied.

He glanced around him, and after a moment's reflection said:

'If you tell him that I am a private detective,' said he, in the same low tone, 'and that I have information which may lead to the recovery of the will he has advertised for, and possibly to the apprehension of the murderer who stole it, he may think it worth while to give me an interview.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ADMIRAL AND JACK COME TO AN ARRANGEMENT WITH THE DETECTIVE.

My first impulse, as the danger to Kitty's father flashed upon my mind, was to get rid of Singleton by some expedient, in order that the Admiral might not engage him to hunt down the Vicar's murderer; but a moment's consideration showed me the impracticability of this design, and also the inadvisability of it before I had ascertained whether the detective's suspicions were directed against Yorke or another. With a view to learning something upon this point I took Mr. Singleton into the morning-room — Miss

Strong and her friend being in the garden—and, closing the door, told him that my name was Holderness, that I was greatly interested in the mysterious crime that had taken place, and that I should feel much obliged if he would give me some more precise information with regard to the facts he wished to communicate to the Admiral.

With a smile at my simplicity, he replied that he had told me quite as much as he felt justified in divulging.

'Indeed,' said he, 'if you had not been Mr. Holderness I shouldn't have let out so much as I have.'

'How?' said I sharply; 'you knew my name was Holderness, and yet at our meeting you asked if I was not Admiral Strong.'

'That was what we call a draw,' said he with a wink; 'if you had been the Admiral there would have been no necessity to pretend ignorance.'

I tried him with one or two questions, but

finding that he at any rate was not to be drawn, I left him, and returned to the orchard in a flutter of apprehension and excitement. The Admiral was getting warm in his discussion with Yorke, who faced him with phlegmatic coolness.

'Well, if you don't like the music,' cried the Admiral, 'there's a couple of alternatives for you—you can go elsewhere or you can buy the gun.'

'That's what parson advised,' replied Yorke, 'and for the sake of peace and quiet I'll buy the instrument at the market price of old iron, for as a gun I reckon it's about the biggest failure this old country has ever produced. I have a hog-sticking machine in Chicago which would create more havoc in the ranks of an enemy in five minutes than your cart-wheel would produce in five centuries. You may send in the bill with the article when you feel like trading. Morning, Admiral.'

As he turned his back on the Admiral, whose wrath could find no words, I stepped up to the old gentleman and delivered Singleton's message.

He called Jack, who was superintending the removal of the bolts from the machine, and having repeated Singleton's message, cried eagerly:

'Come on, Mr. Jack, we will hear what the fellow has to say; but I'll never believe he's on the right scent unless he tells us that those two rascals are at the bottom of it;' with that he shook his fist at the backs of Yorke and the curate.

As I was not invited to take part in the interview, I remained in the paddock, hoping to find an opportunity of letting Yorke know of the detective's visit.

But I can relate here what took place in the morning-room from the particulars which Jack gave me later on.

'Well, young man,' said the Admiral, as

they entered the room, 'I hear you have something to tell me with respect to the missing will.'

'I have, Mr. Strong,' replied Singleton, 'but with your permission I will close this window, for what I have to say is only for your ear and Mr. Sherridan's,' he added, looking at Jack.

'Oh, you know Mr. Sherridan, do you?'

'Naturally, sir, I have not neglected to make myself acquainted with a gentleman who is quite as deeply concerned as yourself in the recovery of the will. I saw you first, sir, with Mr. Holderness at Scarborough.'

'I haven't the slightest remembrance of having seen you there or elsewhere.'

'Dare say not, sir,' replied Singleton, with a smile puckering his meagre cheek. 'I have to know a great many people who are never likely to know me. Well, now, sir,' addressing the Admiral, 'may I take a chair? Thank you—to business. You have been

advertising for some time an offer of a thousand pounds for the recovery of a will supposed to have been left by the late Mr. Roger Sherridan. To avoid wasting your time and my own, will you kindly tell me if you see any reasonable prospect of that will being given up by the party who now has it in his possession ?'

'No, I don't,' replied the Admiral stoutly.

'That is also your view ?' said Singleton, turning to Jack.

'No,' said Jack, 'that is not my opinion.'

'Then something has happened within the last three days to change your opinion,' said Singleton, as sharp as a needle.

'Possibly,' said Jack, careful not to commit himself.

'I should very much like to know what has happened, Mr. Sherridan,' said Singleton, with a puzzled look over his face.

'Ay, and so should I,' exclaimed the Admiral.

'I dare say you would like to know, Mr. Singleton,' said Jack, 'especially if you happened to be engaged by the other side to find out the length of our suspicions.'

'D—— it, I didn't think of that,' cried the Admiral. 'What have you got to say for yourself now, Mr. Detective?'

'Only this, sir, that if Mr. Sherridan suspects me of acting "on the other side," I am surprised that a gentleman of his shrewdness should let me know that his views are changed. Such an admission would put the other side on its guard.'

'Hang this skirmishing from the tops!' cried the Admiral impatiently; 'let's come to serious action. Now, what's your game, sir, eh?'

'Hum! It looks as if Mr. Sherridan has taken the game out of my hands. I came here to offer my professional services for the recovery of the will, but I cannot expect you to put yourself to any expense while your

friend holds out the hope of producing it for nothing.'

'Ha! what do you say to that, Mr. Jack, with these opinions that you have kept so mighty secret?' asked the Admiral, with some acerbity.

'If the person who holds the will finds no means of turning it to a more profitable advantage, it is a fair presumption that he will give it up and take the handsome reward you offer.'

'Why, there's something in that, to be sure, eh?' said the Admiral, turning on Singleton.

'Not much,' replied he, with a smile. 'And I doubt very much if Mr. Sherridan really bases his opinion on that possibility. If he had practised in the criminal courts as long as he has studied for the Bar, he would know that nearly every crime is traced home to the perpetrator by his attempt to dispose of the stolen property. It is exceedingly

difficult for an old hand, an experienced thief, to sell his plunder for anything like its absolute value. The difficulty is greater still when the thief is unacquainted with the means to be employed. He dare not offer the article for sale as you might offer a horse or anything to which you might show a legal right—it must be done in an indirect and roundabout fashion. Now, supposing the will is at present in the hands of a person who is not a professional thief——'

'We will suppose it's the Rev. Mr. Crawley,' said the Admiral slyly.

'As you please, sir; suppose it is the Rev. Mr. Crawley Shepherd; it would be practically impossible for him to claim your reward without laying himself open to immediate arrest by the police—unless he could do it through an intermediary, a thief who knows his business——'

'And suppose he's hand-in-glove with such a thief, calling himself by the name of Shuttle!'

cried the Admiral, banging his fist on the table.

'Quite so, sir; *suppose* he had the assistance of Mr. Decimus Shuttle, what do you think he would have to pay him for the risk he runs? At least three-fourths of the sum received. Now, do you think anyone holding any sort of position in society would place himself under the thumb of such a man for the small sum of two hundred and fifty pounds? If Mr. Shuttle knew his business he could blackmail Mr. Shepherd to the end of his days by the threat of betrayal. And remember, gentlemen, it is not merely prosecution for theft which Mr. Shepherd has to encounter; it is prosecution for the murder of the Vicar of St. Botolph's.'

'Ay, there you are again,' said the Admiral, with a shake of his head. 'Now, what have you got to say to that, Mr. Jack?'

'The argument is good enough. I have nothing to say against it.'

'And yet you are of opinion that the will may be given up. Given up—not sold,' the detective said quickly, fixing his sharp eyes on Jack, whose attitude clearly perplexed and interested him greatly.

'What the dickens is the good of all this beating up and filling and tacking?' exclaimed the Admiral, losing patience. 'There's nothing but plain sailing, as I can see. Look here, Mr. What's-your-name—I don't know whether you're a knave or a fool, and I don't see that it matters much to me. But if you think you can get the will, set to business without any more of this confounded slack-jaw, and you shall have the thousand pounds I offered when the job's done.'

'Thank you, sir. I will ask you for a note of agreement to that effect.'

'Why, there's my offer printed in the papers. Isn't that enough?'

'I shall want you to rescind that offer, sir, at once. The will must be made as valueless

as a piece of waste-paper to the present owner of it.'

'Or the curate may take the wind out of your sails. That's fair enough. Give me the pen and ink, Jack.'

'The reward should be made payable if the will is restored within a certain time,' Jack suggested, as he brought the writing materials to the Admiral.

'That is reasonable,' said Singleton, after a moment's thought. 'You must give me at least three weeks.'

'The offer shall hold good till the last day of September. How does that suit you?'

Singleton thanked the Admiral for this extension of time, and, while the agreement was being written, drew out a notebook from his pocket, from which he took a folded sheet of paper. When the note of agreement was given him he read it, and, thanking the Admiral again, placed it in his notebook carefully.

'Now, sir,' said he, 'I want you to let me issue this advertisement in certain papers.'

He unfolded the sheet of paper, and laid it before the Admiral and Jack. They read:

'£1,000 reward.—This sum will be paid for such evidence as may lead to the apprehension of the person or persons concerned in the murder of Mr. Roger Sherridan on the night of June 12. Apply to James Singleton, Chancery Lane, London. N.B.—All previous offers for the restoration of property stolen from the deceased are hereby revoked.'

'This runs me aground!' exclaimed the Admiral. 'I could have paid the reward for the recovery of the will, for that would have made me a rich man; but if the will is not given up I see no way of paying this sum. For I take it, Mr. Clever, you're not sufficiently disinterested to pay the money out of your own pocket.'

'Not at all, Mr. Strong; but I'm prepared to pay something. If you decline to contri-

bute anything I must lower the amount of the reward. Of course, it's unreasonable to expect Mr. Sherridan to pay for the proceedings which, in all probability, will deprive him of a fortune.'

'On the contrary,' said Jack, as quietly as he could under the sting of this insinuation, 'it is no more than you should expect of an honourable man, Mr. Singleton.'

As he spoke he took a sheet of paper and wrote an agreement to pay the reward for the apprehension of his grandfather's murderers.

'Jack,' said the Admiral, in a low voice, grasping his hand as Singleton read the paper, 'if that old fellow, Mr. Thingumy, were to drop in here to-night, he'd have to blow out his candle and go home to his tub in the dark.'

'With this,' said Singleton, rising as he slipped his notebook into the breast-pocket of his coat, 'I feel tolerably certain that we shall run the rascals down. It isn't enough

for me to recover the will, though that alone would be pretty good biz. My main object is to get the murderer convicted, which will establish my reputation, and bring me in more than your reward, Mr. Strong.' He paused at the door, looking in his hat reflectively, then, cocking his eye at Jack, said: 'But I should have liked to know your reasons for thinking the will would be given up without outside influences. However,' he added, as Jack made no other reply than a chuckle, 'I shall find that out within twenty-four hours.'

CHAPTER XXX.

A FRUITLESS EFFORT.

'I AM very doubtful whether we have done the right thing in this affair,' said Jack to me, after recounting what I have put into form in the last chapter. 'Singleton's an uncommonly clever, sharp, long-headed fellow, and I think he has got the best of us.'

'In what way?' I asked.

'In getting my promise to pay that reward for the apprehension of the murderer without giving any assurance that we should get the will. You see, Dick, our main object is to get the will; his is to run down the murderer, and bring a case before the public which shall

bring him clients. He admitted that, and I saw my error at once—when it was too late to retract or to make stipulations. Of course, he will earn that thousand if he can; but his manner conveyed very little hope of success. He was not elated enough by the Admiral's offer—too anxious to discover my plans to have any faith in achieving that. I am inclined to believe that his proposal with regard to the will was nothing but a pretext for introducing himself and getting a guarantee for the reward which may procure witnesses in the murder case.'

'What witnesses can he expect to get, Jack?' I asked, trembling as I thought of Yorke's danger.

'Oh, he hopes that this large reward will tempt one of these two men at the Vicarage to peach on the other.'

'You think he suspects them?'

'Not a doubt about it. I've made an ass of myself, Dick,' he said, in a tone of deep

vexation. 'So far as the will is concerned, I have done more harm than good.'

'How can that be, if you agree with Singleton that Shepherd would not run the risk of restoring it for such a small share in the profits as would be gained by it ?'

'Why, don't you see, Dick, if that inducement is taken away, none remains. For if the will is rendered valueless, why should he take the trouble to return it ? Slight as the risk of discovery is in sending it to us by post anonymously, it need not be encountered. He has only to put the will in the fire, and there's an end of it. However,' he added, with a shade of anger, 'contemptible as vengeance is, I shall be glad to see those rascals brought to justice, and if money can make one of the scoundrels split on the others, Singleton shall have as much as he needs.'

This announcement, coming from one whose strength of character gave weight to his word,

made my flesh creep with apprehension. For though Shepherd might lack the physical courage to commit a murder, I felt perfectly sure that he was capable of the baser crime of treachery. If these two were partners in the crime, and discovery of their guilt became imminent, Crawley Shepherd would play into Singleton's hands to save himself; the appearance of Singleton's advertisement might frighten him at once into betraying Yorke. On Saturday that advertisement would probably appear in the Chester papers, and on seeing it Shepherd might communicate at once with Singleton.

There was no time to lose: Yorke must be warned immediately. But how? If by some happy accident I should see him walking alone in the Vicarage grounds, it would be impossible to approach him without risking discovery by the curate. If I wrote to him, my letter might be intercepted and read by the curate. The only alternative that pre-

sented itself to my mind was to call upon him openly, and trust to chance for an opportunity of putting him on his guard.

But what pretext could I offer for calling upon a man with whom I was supposed to be so slightly acquainted which should blind the curate to my real purpose ?

By dint of cudgelling my brains, I at length hit on an expedient which seemed sufficiently plausible. Going to Jack, whom also I had to keep in the dark, I asked him if I had not seen 'Baldwin's Early English Music: Sacred and Secular' at the mill-house.

'Why, that's about the last place in the world you would see such a work,' said he. 'No, Dick; you must have seen it at the Vicarage when we were rummaging the library.'

'To be sure,' said I, feigning sudden conviction; 'I remember now. Do you mind my asking Mr. Shuttle to let me have it for a

few hours. I may not have the chance of seeing it again ?'

'I've not the slightest objection, of course, Dick; but,' he added warningly, 'don't let them pump you about our affairs—not a word about Singleton !'

'Trust me, Jack !' said I; and he smiled as I took up my hat to start off, little guessing that my sole purpose was to warn Yorke against the detective.

Mr. Shepherd came to the gate when I rang the Vicarage bell, and greeted me with smiles of gladness.

'*What* a pleasant surprise is this, my deah Mr. Holderness !' he exclaimed, unlocking the gate; 'I was just about to make a *nice* cup of tea for Mr. Shuttle and myself.'

'Ah, I want to speak to Mr. Shuttle, if he is at home.'

'Yes; he never goes out in the day-time. He is such a *strange* gentleman !' He imparted this information in a low tone, but added, in

a voice that might be heard at some distance, 'but *so* kind to me and *so* generous! And I suppose,' lowering his voice again, 'that you have brought an offer from that deah funny old Admiral with regard to the gun which Mr. Shuttle offered to purchase?'

'No,' I replied, in a tone of disgust; 'if anyone buys it Mr. Sherridan will. However, it's no business of mine how he disposes of his time and fortune—though it would be a different matter if he were engaged to my niece. You must find it rather dull here, Mr. Shepherd?'

'Hoh deah no! I am nevah dull. I am *so* busy all day! For we cannot find a domestic servant to suit us, and so I have all the work of the house to do. I have my little paraffin-stove and my spirit-lamp to make tea with, and I have not an idle moment the whole day long. It is *so* nice to be useful, isn't it?'

Coming upon the lawn at this point, I

perceived Kitty's father seated under the veranda cross-legged on a chair, whittling a stick, with an expression of abject dejection in his face. He cast a languid glance at me as I came up, and continued whittling the stick as I explained the pretended object of my visit. I made a long story of it, for, as Mr. Shepherd was standing by, I could not let Yorke know by words that I wished to speak with him in private, and I hoped that he would give me an opportunity of communicating my desire by a sign. But he kept his eye fixed on the stick he was chipping the whole time, and when I said that I could show him where the book I wanted was if he would be good enough to let me go into the library with him, he replied:

'I reckon I don't take enough interest in the work to care about inspecting the place where it is situated. You can take the volume.'

He did just raise his eyes for a moment,

and as the curate was then engaged in arranging the tea-things upon a garden-table behind me, I seized the occasion to give Yorke a look which should have said as plainly as words, 'For the sake of Heaven follow me into the library.' Then I went into the room and fumbled about at the shelves of the bookcase, expecting him to saunter in and learn what it was I had to tell him. But he did nothing of the kind, though the length of the time I remained there must have shown him that I had some other purpose than that of getting the book, even if the expression of my face had failed to convey my thoughts.

'Ah, here it is! I've found it at last,' said I, taking down the volume as Mr. Shepherd came in; for I saw it was dangerous to protract the search further.

'But you must not leave me yet awhile!' said he, shaking his finger at me; 'for Mr. Shuttle has kindly permitted me to ask you

to take a little refreshment with us—a *nice* cup of tea and some brown bread and buttah —cut thin, with a little marmalade—all *so* nice! Come, you mustn't say no!'

I accepted the invitation with even a pretence of hesitation, and took my seat at the little table under the veranda with the resolution of making Yorke aware of his peril at all hazards. He was still whittling, and took no notice of us.

'Your tea is getting quite cold, Mr. Shuttle,' said the curate, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

'Let it get!' replied Yorke with a sigh.

Mr. Shepherd glanced at me with a covert smile, which seemed to say, 'What a dear, strange man!' and then, taking up the thread of our previous conversation where it had been dropped, he said:

'And so the engagement between your charming niece, Miss Kitty, and deah Mr. Sherridan is broken?'

'Yes,' said I, delighted with the chance of talking at Yorke; 'and I cannot regret it, Mr. Shepherd. Indeed, under existing circumstances, if I saw any probability of their coming together again I should do all in my power to prevent their marriage. Yes,' I added, raising my voice in exasperation, as Bob Yorke at that moment began to whistle the first bars of 'Yankee Doodle' through his teeth, 'rather than permit her to marry that young man I would reveal everything I have hitherto kept secret from her!'

'You do not really mean to say that you have any secrets from deah Miss Kitty?'

'I am very sorry to say I have!' I answered; and then, the eager curiosity in Mr. Shepherd's face warning me that I had gone far enough, I said no more.

'How very sad! But I fear your objection to Mr. Sherridan is only too well founded. From his youth he has been too

careless of the possessions which Providence has showered upon him. He has shown a reckless indifference to the guidance of Prudence, which must inevitably lead him into the Slough of Destitution. How long, ah, how long, will it be befoah his fortune is squandered in foolish devices?'

'It is probable that the fortune will not be long his to squander!'

'Deah Mr. Holderness, what *do* you mean?' asked Mr. Shepherd, letting the sugar fall from the tongs in his surprise. I noticed that Yorke's whistling grew pianissimo at the same time.

'Well, I suppose the matter is no secret, as it has been told to me by the person most interested in it; indeed, I can see no harm in the fact being known. Since I saw you this morning a detective has been at The Cedars.'

'A detective!' exclaimed the curate, in a tone which betrayed something more than

simple curiosity, while Yorke continued to whistle softly with unshaken complacency.

'A detective from London,' said I impressively, 'who, tempted by the large reward offered by Admiral Strong, has undertaken to discover the author of the crime committed here last June.' Here I sipped my tea and asked for a little more sugar, not to be outdone by Yorke in pretended indifference. The curate was the worst actor of the three. Instead of giving me the sugar I asked for, he flooded my cup with milk, and with such an unsteady hand that he felt it necessary to offer an excuse for his want of self-command.

'Your information has quite *agitated* me, I declare,' said he; 'but it is very natural that I should feel deeply concerned in anything relating to the murdah of my deah old friend and mastah. And do you really believe this detective is likely to succeed?'

'He is so confident of it that he is willing to accept payment by result for his services.'

'Excuse me, sir, for chipping in,' said Yorke; 'but what might you mean by that?'

'He undertakes to recover the will in three weeks for the reward already offered by the Admiral.'

'I am enlightened,' said Yorke, returning to his monotonous occupation.

'But, my deah Mr. Holderness, what necessity was there to make known his intentions? The reward has been publicly offered, and is open to anyone who has the powah to win it.'

'That is so, parson; 'pears to me this detective is a clam as regards intelligence.'

'The reward is no longer open to anyone,' said I. 'The detective stipulates on the Admiral revoking his offer, in order that the will may be rendered valueless to the person who stole it.'

'That alters the 'pearance of things, parson,' Yorke observed.

'But, deah Mr. Shuttle, if the will is ren-

dered valueless, there is no inducement to the thief to preserve it; and if he destroy it, how can the detective recovah it?'

'Mebbe,' observed Yorke, 'the officer calculates on trading with the thief, who might feel disposed to sell up at a discount. That's how things are usu'ly fixed up in our country, but whether your police are educated up to that p'int I am unable to say.'

'But that would imply, my deah sir, that the detective is acquainted with the thief.'

'He is,' said I sharply.

The curate fixed me with his little blue eyes for a moment; then he shot a glance at Yorke, who, closing one eye, was critically examining the pointed stick with the other.

'At any rate,' I added, 'though, of course, he would give no names, he led the Admiral to believe that he had no doubt whatever on that point.'

Mr. Shepherd made an attempt to conceal his agitation by bending over his teacup;

but I saw beads of perspiration standing on his temples. I took a slice of bread-and-butter.

'And what is Mr. Sherridan's opinion on the subject?' asked Mr. Shepherd, breaking the silence. 'He has studied for the Bah, and should have special knowledge of such mattahs.'

'He entertains but little hope of the will being recovered, maintaining that the detective's chief object is to run the murderer to earth.'

Once more Yorke began to whistle through his teeth.

'Deah me! Did he tell you his grounds for supposing that?'

Yorke had shut up his knife, and was brushing the chips from his knees. I thought it best to come to the point speedily.

'He bases his supposition, I believe, on the measures about to be taken by the detective.'

'Do you know the nature of those measures, my deah friend?' asked the curate eagerly.

'In the first place,' said I, raising my voice a little, that Yorke might not lose a word, 'he is about to offer a reward of a thousand pounds, *not* for the recovery of the will, but for such information as shall lead to the conviction of the murderer.'

Yorke, rising from his chair, gave a contemptuous chuckle. The curate's face lost half its terror as he heard it. Turning to Yorke, he asked in earnest solicitude:

'May I ask, Mr. Shuttle, why that measure excites your amusement?'

'I la'ghed, parson, at the simplicity of folks in this country. I do not wish to wound your national pride, but allow me to remark that on our side a detective officer that couldn't show a better hand than that would be advised to stand out of the game. In our State a man who has to advertise for someone to help him wouldn't get ten cents a day to hunt

up lost hogs. Good-afternoon, Mr. Holderness.'

And with that he turned on his heel and entered the house, leaving me at the very moment that I was about to show him the real danger of the situation.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A TERRIBLE ADVENTURE.

I DID not stay long with the Rev. Mr. Shepherd after Yorke left us. The purpose of my visit was frustrated; and vexed with myself for not having made better use of my opportunity, exasperated with Yorke for his perverse indifference to the warning which he must have seen it was my object to convey, I felt ill-disposed to continue conversation with the curate. As I expected, he tried to learn the name and address of the detective from me, but I professed to know neither, and, indeed, added nothing to the information I had already given, seeing that the terror

I had already inspired was sufficient to precipitate the catastrophe I dreaded.

When I rose to go, he begged me to 'stay a *little* longah,' but in such a half-hearted way that I saw he was as anxious as I to end our *tete-à-tête*. From the moment he perceived that nothing more was to be got out of me his conversational powers collapsed, and his incoherent replies to the general remarks I made showed that his thoughts were wandering elsewhere. I could see he was weighing the probabilities of escape and thirsting to take counsel with Yorke, whose bolder spirit might revive his sinking courage.

I returned to The Cedars with my book, crestfallen and most unhappy. The observations I had made in the course of this interview confirmed my worst apprehensions. Yorke's defiant attitude in the face of danger showed his capability for the boldest and most reckless enterprise; the curate's demeanour displayed barely the hardihood to brazen out

a passive part in the crime. It was impossible to conceive that the panic-stricken wretch quailing at the first hint of discovery could have mustered the nerve and physical strength to murder the Vicar and dispose of his body afterwards.

'It's no good,' I said to myself in this state of depression; 'I have done all that I can. It's useless to attempt more. Is it likely that a strong-willed, obstinate man like Yorke will submit to the guidance of an old fellow like me? It is clear that he regards my efforts with contempt, and will go his own way, though it leads to the devil. Well, let him go to the devil, I'll not stand in his way!' But when the feeling of exasperation which provoked this anathema wore off, and I thought of poor Kitty and the heritage of shame in store for her, a better sentiment took its place, and I resolved that I would try again and again to avert the calamity of a public exposure of her father's crime, and

suffer no rebuffs to turn me from my purpose. I saw that I might find another opportunity of communicating with Yorke when I returned the book I had borrowed. 'The advertisement will not appear before Saturday,' thought I, 'and if I take the book back to-morrow and warn him, he will have a clear day to get away before Shepherd can betray him to Singleton.'

However, a chance of approaching Yorke without the curate's knowledge presented itself earlier than I expected.

Miss Strong had organized a singing-class in the village, which she herself conducted, and, as the weekly meeting was to be held that evening, she asked us if we should like to accompany her. Of course, we readily accepted the invitation, and at eight o'clock we started out together for the village schoolroom, where, arriving a little behind the hour, we found the choir already assembled. The lamps were lit; there was a hum of

voices and laughter; the young men and girls stood in groups all with smiling happiness on their faces, and I was saying to myself that here at any rate one could escape for an hour or two from lugubrious thoughts of crime, when my eye suddenly fell upon the sandy-haired curate, who, the one solitary figure in the room, was gravely dusting the harmonium, at which Miss Strong was to sit, with his pocket-handkerchief. It had never entered my imagination that he would be there, though it was the most natural thing in the world that he should take part in a function of this kind, especially as Miss Strong presided over it.

I looked round for Yorke. He was not there. Then it occurred to me that if I could get away before Shepherd saw me, I could go to the Vicarage, find Yorke, and tell him all that was on my mind with no fear of interruption or discovery.

Happily, Miss Strong had stopped in the

entrance-hall to speak to a friend, and no one as yet had observed me. With a forlorn smile the curate was now dusting Miss Strong's music-stool. I drew back stealthily, and passed out unseen. Jack was standing a little apart from Miss Strong and her friend. I drew him aside, and told him I felt indisposed, and begged him to make whatever excuse he could for me should Miss Strong observe my departure.

'Nothing serious, old fellow?' he asked, walking with me slowly to the door.

'No, no. I shall be all right in the fresh air,' said I, and with that I made my escape.

The church clock chimed the half-hour past eight as I reached the Vicarage. The gate was locked. I raised my hand to ring the bell, but I paused with the reflection that possibly Yorke would be less anxious to see me than I was to see him. He had every reason to expect a pretty long string of reproaches and complaints from me, and to

escape my jeremiads he might think it advisable, on seeing who was at the front gate, to slip out at the back gate for a quiet stroll.

'I'll not give you the chance, hang you!' said I, apostrophizing him in imagination. 'You shall hear me out to-night, whether you like it or not.'

So I went on to The Cedars, where the gates were unfastened, passed quietly through the front garden, worked my way round to the back, and got into the orchard without being seen by a soul. There was still light enough to make out whereabouts the house lay, and after climbing the iron railing I made my way through the orchard, and, skirting the hedge on the farther side, found a wicket-gate opening into the Vicarage garden. The black silhouette of the roof and chimney-stacks now stood out above the evergreens before me, and I was pushing on at a brisk pace, anxious only to take Yorke by

surprise, when the sound of laughter fell upon my ears and caused me to stop abruptly.

The laughter was not loud, yet it was too distinct to come from the road, which was further removed from me than the house. I listened attentively. Presently I heard the faint murmur of distant voices. I could not doubt that the sound came from the house, and a question which had never before occurred to me now crossed my mind: were there more confederates than Yorke and Shepherd in this crime—was the Vicarage a refuge for other criminals besides them?

I own that this question excited a most uncomfortable sense of personal apprehension. I am not a particularly strong man: my spirit is not of what one may call the dare-devil sort; and I confess that on hearing this sound, and conjuring up in imagination the set of villains who might be assembled in the Vicarage, I felt very strongly disposed to retrace my steps and get back to The Cedars

as quickly as possible ; and a very plausible reason for doing so presented itself.

'What,' I asked myself, 'is the use of seeking to get a private word or two with Yorke if he is not alone ? and what may be the consequences of intruding myself upon company of this kind without invitation ? They may take me for a spy and an informer, and whatever lenience Yorke may feel towards me is not likely to be shared by a set of villains unrelated to me.'

Fears which I am now ashamed to admit besieged me then as recollections of the desperate means by which villains silenced the hapless discoverer of their secret meetings crowded my brain.

The evening was still and oppressively hot ; not a breath of air stirred the leaves of the tree-tops that stood out sharp and black against a long gray rift in the dark clouds ; where I stood in the shrubbery there was so little light that I could see nothing but

foliage on each side and a few feet of the path before me. It was ghostly, terrifying, and this effect, with the suffocating closeness, put me in a bath of perspiration. I would have given anything to be back in the Admiral's paddock, and should certainly have retreated but that, having heard no repetition of the sounds that first excited my alarm, it struck me that I ought, at least, to make sure that Yorke was not alone before yielding to the influence of fear.

Advancing with great care and noiselessly, I suddenly found myself at a bend in the path facing the side of the house, my position being almost parallel with the front. The trellis supporting the veranda, with the climbing plants trained upon it, reflected a light from the library. Yorke was in there; but was he alone? I dared not go to him until that question was answered. Silence was not a sufficient assurance; I must look into the room before I ventured even to make myself

heard. With a view to getting a point of view facing the library window, I edged my way along the flower border that skirted the lawn with no other screen but the shadow of the dark evergreens behind me.

I had not proceeded above half a dozen paces when the murmur of voices again struck upon my ear. I stopped, holding my breath to catch the sound more distinctly. The murmuring continued, broken by an occasional pause. I was still too far removed to make out what was said, or to distinguish by the tone of the voices whether Yorke was one of the speakers; but it was no longer possible to doubt whence the sound came. That was enough for me; my sole object now was to get out of the grounds as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, I fancied I saw a way of getting out quicker than I came in. There was an opening in the evergreens at my back, which, I concluded, led directly into the kitchen-garden; and, thinking by this way to

avoid retracing my steps along the open lawn, I drew back, keeping my eye on the house. I felt a slight rise in the ground, but taking no heed of this in my eagerness to escape, I made another step backwards. The next instant my foot slipped with a crash through a glazed propagating frame sunk in the earth, and, in saving myself from falling, the other foot crashed through a second sheet of glass.

As I recovered my equilibrium I glanced with horror towards the house. The whole place was in darkness; the light must have been extinguished almost simultaneously with the noise of the accident that had befallen me. I stood there, up to my knees in the broken frame, not daring to move, for I could hear the broken glass tinkling beneath me with the trembling of my legs, and I knew that any attempt to extricate my feet and escape would lead to a discovery of my whereabouts and a pursuit.

It would be time enough for me to make a

dash for cover when I was better informed as to where the enemy was. I could not suppose that the men would sit tranquilly in the house after hearing the crash which betrayed the near presence of a stranger. I had warned Yorke in the afternoon that a detective was on the track; what more natural conclusion could he form than that this enemy had introduced himself into the grounds with the purpose of discovering his secret? The sudden extinguishing of the light proved that he and his confederates were engaged in some occupation which might not be seen, and that they were alarmed.

But if they had come from the house, where were they? I could see no one, though the obscurity was not sufficient to conceal from my straining eyes some indication of moving figures had they come upon the lawn. Possibly their instinct told them that the open lawn was the last place where a marauder would be found, and they had at once struck

out to lie in wait for me at those points which I must pass in making my escape. For aught I knew they might be just behind me, or within pistol-shot of me on my right or on my left. There was no reason why they should not put a bullet in me if they caught me making off. Yorke, in his character of an American, might take the blame on himself for my mortal injury by declaring that he mistook me for a thief, and pleading custom as his right to shoot trespassers.

'I'll stay here all night,' said I to myself, 'rather than run the risk of being shot by these bloody-minded ruffians.'

So I stood there, bending low that my white shirt-front and collar and my face, which I doubt not was scarcely less white, should not betray me, and waited.

But I was not altogether idle. It struck me that when the curate returned Yorke or another would have to go and let him in. This would lessen the number of enemies on

the look-out for me by one, and I might then perhaps withdraw, at least from my present position, which might become untenable if the moon rose and its light fell on me in my exposed situation.

With infinite precaution I loosened and removed the pieces of glass that surrounded my legs, and succeeded at length in clearing a space sufficiently large to allow of my getting my feet out of the frame without any fresh breakage. I know not how long this operation took me, but I seemed to have been standing there an age, when at last the sonorous gate-bell rang. I determined that as soon as I saw anyone cross the lawn in the direction of the gate I would certainly make an attempt to escape, come what might, and I ranged the lawn with my eyes in eager expectancy.

But no one appeared; not a movement or a sound showed that anyone intended to go to the gate.

The delay was so long that I began to expect the bell to be rung again, when I saw two figures emerge from the darkness, sauntering across the lawn, not towards the gate, but from it ; and my eyes being now accustomed to the obscurity, I made out clearly enough that one of the figures was Yorke, and the other Shepherd. Yorke must already have been on the other side of the lawn when the bell rang, and he must have worked his way round by the back of the house and the path behind the shrubbery towards the outbuildings, or I must have seen him. They were talking, but in a tone that made their conversation unintelligible to my ear, and, having crossed the lawn, they entered the house by the open window of the library.

'Now's the time,' said I to myself, and, drawing up my feet one after the other carefully, I got out of the frame without noise, and, emboldened by this achievement, groped my way softly through the shrubbery, through

the kitchen-garden in safety, and, reaching the orchard, made a fair bolt for the paddock, which I gained in safety and with a sense of relief for which I can find no words.

CHAPTER XXXII.

I GAIN MY OBJECT AT LAST.

The adventure, which had stricken me with real terror in the darkness of night, bore a much less frightful aspect when I looked back at it the next morning. Indeed, when I figured myself standing in a cucumber frame for a couple of hours, too frightened to stir, I perceived that the incident had almost a ludicrous side. And, after all, what had my discovery amounted to? Simply that there were other inmates, possibly only one other, of the Vicarage besides Yorke and the curate. The existence of a third party to the crime was scarcely surprising; the concealment of

the fact added to the mystery which surrounded the crime, but neither increased nor diminished the sum of Yorke's guilt. As for the band of desperadoes conjured up in my terror-stricken imagination as prowling about with pistols to take my life, their existence was made so unreal by the light of reason and calm reflection that I ceased to think of them except with a blush for my pusillanimity.

And being after a good breakfast as bold as I had been cowardly overnight before the supper, which I was too much upset to eat, I resolved to persevere in the attempt to communicate with Yorke and carry out the intention I had made before my unlucky nocturnal expedition. So, having written in a bold hand on a slip of paper these words: 'I must and *will* see you privately. Appoint a place of meeting,' and placed the slip between the pages of the book I had borrowed from Yorke, I tucked the volume under my arm and went

round to the Vicarage by the road. I rang the bell, and after a little delay Mr. Shepherd came down and opened the gate. He had a smut on his nose, his face looked more than usually warm and greasy, he wore a threadbare old coat, and a pair of wash-leather gloves.

'Had it been anyone but you, deah Mr. Holderness,' he said, 'I should have had to keep you waiting a little longer while I changed my attire; for you have caught me quite in the midst of my little domestic occupations.'

Taking this exception in my favour as a compliment, I thanked him for not standing on formalities with me, and, showing him the book, told him that with his permission I would give it back to Mr. Shuttle himself.

'You will find him in the library,' said he, 'reading his newspaper;' and then, as he walked by my side, with his mincing, springy gait, he told me of the 'great treat' he had

had in meeting 'deah Mr. Sherridan' at the singing-class.

Yorke was seated in the library with his hat on, one leg thrown over the arm of his chair, reading a newspaper, which he had rolled on a stick in the American way. Mr. Shepherd stood beaming at the open window as I took the book in and laid it on the table before Yorke.

I had my finger between the pages where I had placed the slip of paper, and I managed to draw it out so that Yorke might see it as I thanked him for the loan; but he regarded me with such stolid indifference, as he listened and replied to me, that I almost doubted if he had taken the trouble to observe what I did. However, I had scarcely left the room when he called to me, and, meeting me at the window as I returned, handed me my slip of paper, saying:

'I guess this ain't in the in*ven*tory. 'Pears to be a bookmark you've fixed in the cover.'

I was about to declare that I knew nothing about it, when I perceived that a few words were pencilled under my message. I took it, saying it was a note I had made in reading, and, thanking him again, slipped it in my waistcoat pocket. As soon as I was clear of the Vicarage I took the slip eagerly from my pocket and read what Yorke had written:

'Scarborough racecourse, 2, to-morrow.'

Those were the words, though how he had contrived to fix the appointment in the time almost passed my comprehension. Probably he guessed the purport of the paper the moment he saw it, and had got the pencil ready in his pocket to write a reply before I left the room; but the quickness of thought and act was not less marvellous to me than a conjurer's sleight of hand.

It struck me that he might very well have appointed a meeting-place where we should be free from observation without making me journey right to the other side of England.

'However,' said I to him in imagination, 'if you think distance will balk me, you are very much mistaken, and though it may not be the easiest thing in the world to pick out the person you're looking for from the crowd on a racecourse, I'll find you, my man, if you're there, and a nice dressing-down I'll give you!'

Fortunately, two or three letters had been forwarded on to me from the mill-house, and taking one of them as a pretext, I told Jack when we went upstairs before lunch that I had business to do at Scarborough which would take me away the next morning.

'Business won't detain you there long, I hope?' said Jack interrogatively.

'Not more than a day or two, I expect.'

'So much the better; for, you see, I feel more distinctly than ever that I was not made to live alone.'

'Why, you're not alone here,' said I.

'M—no; but I think this is a good occa-

sion to terminate our visit, which has already extended a day or two beyond our anticipation. From what I observed last night, I am perfectly sure that rascal Shepherd will make Miss Strong an offer of marriage as soon as I am out of the way. He walked home with us from the schoolroom, and we worked him up into a fever of jealousy and avaricious fear. Miss Strong played the part of a coquette to perfection, and I would talk of nothing but the gun and the wonderful results to be obtained by sinking a few thousands in bringing it to perfection. If we leave to-morrow, Miss Strong, I know, will give him an opportunity of speaking on Sunday. Then, when he sees his case is perfectly hopeless, you may depend upon it he won't hesitate to give up the will —unless,' he added, seeing a doubt in my face, 'unless the other rascal, Shuttle, prevents him.'

I vowed in my heart that Yorke should not prevent the restoration of the will; but I felt

less confident in my influence over him just then, for my spirits had been greatly damped by a letter from poor Kitty.

'Faith, uncle darlint,' she wrote, with an attempt to be gay in the midst of her troubles, 'it's a sore heart your little Kitty has at this moment, and that's the truth. Do you remember, dear, how you used to take me on your knee, and coax me into confessing my grief when you saw me down-hearted, and how you led me to laugh in the end at the little trouble that threatened to make me cry? 'Tis just such comforting kindness that I need now. Dear, I put my arm round your neck and hide my face against your shoulder, in the old way, that you may not see what a child I am still. But how shall I tell you all that I feel, without the coaxing and a tender word of sympathy to encourage confession?

'I must own, to begin with, that I feel a

little bit vexed with you, uncle dear; and the feeling, I think, springs from jealousy. I did not feel really happy when I heard that you were going to visit these grand people at Chester, though, of course, I hoped that you would enjoy yourself with them, and I am not at all glad that you find them so much more agreeable than you expected. I can't like Miss Strong any the more because she is amiable and handsome and an excellent musician. You did not tell me whether she was short or tall; but if she is the latter I know I should hate her completely. This shows that I am jealous. But have I no reason to feel envious, and, as I hinted, just a little bit vexed with you? For why should you go to see people whom you scarcely knew when you knew (or should have known) that your Kitty was hungering to see you? Are you waiting to be invited? Must I tell you that I want you? Will you come to me when you leave The Cedars? I love you, and need

you so much that I can humble myself to accept you at secondhand.

'Of course, the question of expense has nothing to do with your coming; but I may tell you, as a matter of fact, that living is cheap here, and that I know of lodgings to be let near the Phœnix Park which would be simply perfect, if they were humanized with the scent of my dear old uncle's pipe. One other fact should be mentioned, which is that I have put by a purse full of money which I have no heart to spend on myself. I have found out the cause of my wretchedness—it is this separation. The best of friends are nothing in comparison with an uncle—someone whose heart and soul is part of myself. I have felt this as I have never felt it before leaving you. And this craving for one's kin turns my thoughts constantly towards my father. I want to see him, to help him, to be of some real good to him—to be, in fact, his daughter, and not the stranger I have been

kept—rightly, perhaps, while I was too young to think and act seriously. But this is too grave a subject to open in a letter which I'm afraid exposes a very weak side of my character. Still, grave subjects are not to be set aside altogether, and when we are happily together again I shall expect you to help me in finding out how to make my father happier.

'I am better for opening my heart—less vexed with you, more at peace with myself. I raise my face now, with only a little blush for my weakness, and bid you good-night with a very loving feeling in my heart.

'YOUR KITTY.

'P.S.—I will write again to-morrow and tell you all the news, and I think you might do the same. Your letters are tantalizing; you do leave so much to my imagination. I should like to know if Mr. Sherridan is writing another play, and what are the subjects you converse about when you are alone.

It always seemed to me that his talk—even his small talk—was better worth remembering than anything one could find in printed books. Does he interest himself in music now that he is staying with such musical people? Cannot you give me a more definite description of Miss Strong? What sort of eyes has she? Is she a prude or a flirt? Is she tall?—no, on second thoughts, I don't want to hear another word about her. Good-night, dear.'

I longed, and yet dreaded, to answer this letter in person. My heart fluttered with joy at the thought of seeing the dear girl again and renewing our old course of life—trotting out with her, marketing after breakfast, or dropping into the theatre for rehearsal with the attendant bustle and gossip; putting on our best for an hour's stroll in the afternoon; observing her across the footlights at night, and then going home together to supper, with all the little incidents attending the nightly

performance to talk about and discuss. Oh yes ; my dear Kitty was quite right. The best of friends (and no man could wish for a better than I had in Jack) was not to be compared with one's own flesh and blood.

But that which damped the pleasure with which I meditated going to Dublin and rejoining Kitty was the difficulty of answering the questions she would put with regard to her father, without betraying all I knew and suspected of his evil ways. Clearly, she had made up her mind to know the truth about him, and it seemed to me merciful to keep her in ignorance. Unable to make up my mind either one way or the other—whether to yield to the inclination of my heart and go, or to obey the hard dictate of reason and stay away —I said to myself it would be time enough to decide the question when I had sounded Yorke to the very core.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

KITTY'S FATHER MAKES A PROMISE.

Owing to a delay at Malton it was past one when the train reached Scarborough, and by the time I got to the racecourse it was nearly two. The first race was about to be run, and as I surveyed the throng of people densely packed along the course, I owned to myself that I was a fool to have been led on such a wild-goose chase, for there seemed as little chance of finding Bob Yorke in such a crowd as a needle in a bottle of hay.

I skirted the pressed ranks, bewildered by the multitude of faces, deafened by the babel of voices, and the hoarse cries of the book-

makers. But the confusion was greater when the race was run, for then the mob, dispersing like a swarm of ants, rendered circulation impossible ; my toes were trampled on, and my clothes nearly torn off my back, by the roughs pushing and driving to get at the bookmakers, while the shrieking of steam whistles on the roundabouts, the banging of drums, and the ringing of bells in the shows, together with the shouting of men hailing each other, the mad cursing, swearing, and laughing around me, created a din that paralyzed one's faculties. However, I pushed forward, looking this way and that, with no clear idea of the way I was going, or any definite scheme of finding my man until I was fairly exhausted by my efforts, and only too glad to find a space against the course rail where I could stand and fetch my breath without danger of being knocked over. The frantic rush was over, and the crowd was congregating round the gamblers and sharpers

who had come there to trade on the avarice and credulity of the mob. I was in the thick of these gentry, it seems, and had scarcely yet recovered my composure, when someone tapped me on the shoulder, and, as I turned, put a purse in my hand before I knew what he was doing. At the same time a man standing on a box, surrounded by a circle of gaping idlers, took off his hat most politely, and, addressing me, said:

'Does that there purse belong to you, my lord?'

I shook my head.

'Open it, and see if the contents are yours —there are three half-crowns, I believe.'

'They are not mine,' said I, offering to return the purse.

'No matter, my lord,' said he glibly; 'what is mine shall be yours, and what is yours shall be mine. Take the lot, three half-crowns and the purse, for two-and-six? No? Hand me the purse, if you please, that

I may show you there is no deception.' I had to enter the circle to return the purse. He took out the three half-crowns, threw them in again one by one, pattering all the while, and turned to the crowd. 'Now, I gives you all an equal chance, and no preference to the nobility. If the po'r man won't have it it shall go to Lord Noddy—you won't? Very well, then, my honoured friend' (turning to me), 'it's yours for two-and-six.'

'Take it, old laad,' said a voice at my elbow in a broad North-country accent.

I shook my head, and turning to the speaker, who I suspected was a confederate, I had it on my tongue to tell him that I was not such a fool as I looked, when I recognised that the grinning countryman at my side, in a black Sunday suit and felt hat, was none other than Kitty's father. He turned on his heel and sauntered off, I following, amidst the burst of laughter raised

by a witticism of the sharper at my expense. It was humiliating to be found in such a position by the man I had come to call to account for his follies and his misdeeds.

He sauntered on in front from group to group until we were clear of the crowd, and then, turning to me, said:

'You've a funny notion of keeping an appointment.'

'I couldn't have hit on a likelier place to find you, it seems, than in a collection of rogues and vagabonds,' said I sharply.

'They're not all rogues and vagabonds,' he retorted slyly; 'and so perhaps I did not make a bad shot in looking for you there.'

After this skirmish we walked on in silence, Yorke's brisk pace indicating a set purpose. Turning up a back street in the town, he led the way into a respectable eating-house, and upstairs to a dining-room looking on the street. At this hour the town was deserted. There was no one in the dining-room, and

when the attendant had served us with the cold beef and ale which Yorke in his broad dialect had ordered, we were left quite alone. We were both hungry, and opened our mouths only to eat and drink till our cravings were appeased.

'Well,' said Yorke at length, 'what have you got to say to me, Dick?'

'Read that,' said I, putting the newspaper before him, which I had bought at Chester before starting, and pointing to Singleton's advertisement.

He read it as he munched a mouthful of bread in silence, and then held the paper to the light to decipher the address at the foot of the announcement, which was blurred in the printing.

'Oh, Singleton, Chancery Lane,' said he with a contemptuous jerk of the head, as he laid down the paper and cut himself another slice from the joint.

'He's not to be despised,' said I, 'and

I only wish you had as much perception as he, for then you would see your danger, and save yourself while there is yet time.'

'What danger?—the chance of someone seeing that advertisement, who could swear to having seen me do for——' I stopped him with a gesture of terror, for, low as his voice was, I dreaded an eavesdropper, and said in a whisper:

'That's a small chance, I admit; but there's worse to fear than that.'

'What?'

'The treachery of a confederate; what effect will this advertisement have on the curate?'

'That's what I should like to know.'

'I'll tell you, Bob. It will lead him to betray you in order to save himself. If I am not mistaken, I saw him at Chester station this morning. When did you promise to return to the Vicarage?'

'To-morrow.'

'Then take my word for it, he has gone up to London to see the detective Singleton.'

'Do you think so?'

'I'm sure of it. If you had observed him as I did the other day, you would have seen the signs of terror in his face when I told him of Singleton's visit; when he found my statement confirmed by the advertisement in the *Weekly Gazette* this morning, you may be certain that he did not hesitate a moment as to the course he would take. I intended to warn you of his treachery the other day, but you wouldn't wait to hear all I had to say.'

'A good job I didn't. Shepherd can do without any prompting of that kind.'

'The prompting would have made no difference, as he could not learn Singleton's address until the advertisement appeared.'

Yorke pushed aside his plate, set his elbow on the table, and, dropping his jaw in the palm of his hand, looked out of the window reflectively. I did not break his meditations,

for I hoped that they would lead him to realize the peril of his situation. After a minute or two of silence he turned his head to me and said :

'How're your legs, Dick ; did you cut 'em much with that glass ?'

'Never mind my legs,' said I in a fury ; 'it's your worthless neck we've got to think about.'

'That's in no danger from Mr. Crawley Shepherd.'

'Maybe he is not the only partner you have to fear. Who was that you were with the other night ?'

'When you walked into the frame ? Oh, he's a friend of mine—a gentleman.'

'A pretty gentleman, I should think, when you found it necessary to put out the light the moment you heard a footstep. Is he an accomplice ?'

'Yes,' said Yorke, with a sullen nod. 'He's in it.'

'And is he at the Vicarage now?' I asked, taking advantage of Yorke's unusual communicativeness.

'I expect he is — unless,' he replied, smothering a yawn, 'unless he's gone up to town with Shepherd.'

'What!' I exclaimed, 'you can gape with indifference at the possibility of those two villains conspiring together in your absence to sell you to Singleton?'

'Look here, Dick—I don't care a rap for either of 'em, nor for Singleton either. They're welcome to conspire together in my absence as much as they like. They can't touch me!'

'What do you mean by that, Bob?' I asked, with a sudden flash of hope. 'That your share of the guilt is less than theirs—that they have more to fear by exposure of the crime than you have? Tell me, Bob, and you'll take an awful load off my mind!'

He regarded me in silence for a minute, and then, a gleam of kindness kindling in his face, he replied :

'Well, if it will make you easier, Dick, I'll admit that I'm not the worst of the lot.'

'Thank God!' I exclaimed fervently, as I grasped his hand for the first time that day. 'If you had only told me this before, what a deal of anxiety you would have spared me!'

'It doesn't do to open one's mouth too wide—you're such a chap to jump at conclusions!'

'You forced the conclusions by your own reticence,' said I. 'If you had only hinted that there was a third party concerned, it would have been different. But it's obvious to everyone that the curate could not have done that deed alone—a weak-kneed, timorous wretch like that—and the natural inference was that you had taken the bolder part in the crime. Now, if you had not kept the other man out of sight——'

'Why, then we should not have put Singleton on a wrong scent. While suspicion falls on me the other man is safe—and suspicion won't hang me!'

'By the way, who is this other man?' I asked, thinking to profit by his expansiveness. But he was not to be caught so easily, and, smiling at me, he replied that I wanted to know too much.

'I can't for the life of me think why you want to screen such a fellow as that!' said I.

'Honour amongst thieves—come now!'

'At any rate, you can tell me one thing, Bob,' I said insinuatingly; 'why on earth have you taken up your quarters at the Vicarage?'

'For one thing, it's the last place in the world where one would look for the Vicar's murderer.'

'But that's not all—what are you doing there now?'

'The same old game!' he replied

cavalierly—'the same game I was at when you met me at Liverpool.'

'And the same game that has brought you here to-day!'

'Oh, I don't expect to do much here! I came principally to see you, and save you the trouble of tramping over the cucumber-frames. Still, I may pick up something,' he observed reflectively, as he scraped his jaw.

I sank back in my chair with a sigh and said no more, discouraged by the perception that he was still a thief and incorrigible. He pulled out his pipe, and, filling it, said:

'Now that you seem to have run to the end of your tether, I've got a few questions to put to you. To begin with'—lighting his pipe—'how about Kitty? I see she is still in Dublin.'

'Yes. I had a letter from her yesterday, and I've brought it with me for you to read.'

He drew his chair towards me eagerly as I opened my pocket-book.

'In the first place,' said I, handing him a packet, 'there are the bank-notes you gave her for a wedding present. Neither she nor I have touched a penny of the money since we knew how you came by it.'

He took the notes in silence, and thrust them with a nod in his breast-pocket as if they had been waste-paper, looking all the while at the letters I was sorting.

'They are all in the same hand; is it hers?' he asked.

'Yes; she writes to me nearly every day. Ah, Bob! you don't know the wealth of love and tenderness you have thrown away.'

The pipe trembled in his lips; he took it out impatiently and laid it down.

'It's her last I want you to read. Ah, here it is! It isn't a bit nicer than the rest —scarcely so nice, to my thinking—but it will reveal her feelings, and that's what I want you to understand.'

He took the letter gently, and looked at the superscription as one might study a face to discover the character of the soul that animates it; then he opened it, and read it slowly through. Watching his face with keen interest, I observed that a great change came over it. The hard look of dogged resolution and sluggish calculation gave place to an expression of almost feminine tenderness and tremulous agitation. But for the lines of care and sorrow and hardship that marked his features, and the grayness of his hair, I could have thought I was looking at the Bob Yorke of fifteen years ago. When he came to the end he set his elbows on the table, and, dropping his face in his hands, bent over the letter, regarding the page in deep silence. I did not move, for fear of disturbing the meditations which I hoped would move his heart to some new and good departure.

At length he raised his head, and, turning the letter, began to read it through again.

At the foot of the first page he paused, and, glancing at me, he said :

'What is your opinion of Mr. Sherridan now ?'

'The same that it always has been. He's a fine fellow. There's not a better in the world.'

'He has been paying a great deal of attention to Miss Strong these last few days.'

'Yes, and to that precious gun as well; but he has no more intention of making Miss Strong his wife than he has of ruining himself on the gun. It's a comedy they are playing to force the curate's hand.'

'I thought so,' said he, nodding. 'Playing with fire is a dangerous game, though.'

'There's no fear of his burning his fingers. He *won't* give up the hope of marrying Kitty. His chief object in trying to discover the lost will is to overcome the objection Kitty raised to marriage. She had to make social inequality an excuse to conceal her real reason

for refusing him. You know what that reason is.'

He nodded, and turned the page in silence.

'She still loves him,' he observed, without taking his eyes from the paper.

'That is obvious,' said I; 'she is jealous, not because I have been staying in the society of Miss Strong, but because he has.'

He nodded again, and read on; and again he lingered over the last page.

'Well, Dick,' he said at length, 'what reply have you made?'

'None yet. I couldn't write before I knew what might come of this interview; and now I don't see my way much clearer.'

'Shall you go to Dublin?'

'I should like to go with all my heart, but dare not. Kitty has a keen perception, and I am not a good actor. I should have to tell all I knew.'

'Then you mustn't go yet awhile,' said he decisively.

'And yet you could make it easy enough,' said I.

'How?'

'By abandoning this course of life at once.'

'That's not so easy.'

'Where is the difficulty? Throw in your lot with us. If you fail to find honest employment you can draw on our common funds. It isn't likely that we shall die of starvation, any of us.'

'No, but Kitty.'

'Well, she desires it, earnestly, sincerely —you have read what she says.'

'Yes, and studied between the lines, too. I know she is sincere, and you also, Dick. But what about Sherridan? Will he marry her when he finds the man he suspects of murder —Decimus Shuttle—is her father?'

This silenced me for a moment, for it was a complication I had not foreseen; then I said:

'I know that Kitty would never repine

for the loss of a husband if she saved her father.'

'No, Dick,' said he firmly, 'that cannot be. My course is nearly run. I've had my day; hers has yet to come, and it shall be a happier one, please God.'

'If those are not merely idle words,' said I, seizing this moment of good feeling to urge him to a better course, 'if you are sincere in what you say, you will take the means that lie ready to your hand to make her happy.'

'What means?' he asked absently, gazing at Kitty's letter.

'Begin a new life.'

'At my age?' said he, with a short laugh.

'At least you can make an effort to avoid public disclosure of past misdeeds. You have not destroyed that will?'

'No.'

'Have you got it with you?'

'No.'

'Then get it without delay, and restore it. Kitty's suspicions are founded chiefly upon your possession of that. Mr. Sherridan will abandon the attempt to discover the author of this crime as soon as the will is produced; he must, for when his fortune goes to Admiral Strong, he will be too poor to pay Singleton to carry the investigations further.'

'That's an idea, Dick,' said Yorke, in a tone of surprise, as he looked at me.

'Come, Bob, promise me you will give up the will—promise it for poor Kitty's sake.'

He rose, and walked to the window in silence. Presently he turned about and said:

'I think I can promise that. But I must do it in my own time and in my own way.'

'I will exact no more than that,' said I, rising; and having taken Kitty's letter to him, I begged him to keep it, that his daughter's presence might sustain him in his good resolution.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR. CRAWLEY SHEPHERD MAKES LOVE.

Yorke took the letter, and placed it in an inner pocket with far more care than he had bestowed on the hundred pounds' worth of notes, pressed my hand in silent gratitude, and then, abruptly ringing the bell for the waitress, put an end to further discussion. When the bill was settled he left me, the girl being still in the room, with the same air of off-hand indifference that characterized our meeting, and as if nothing whatever had occurred to excite the tender feeling which underlay the rude exterior of his strange nature.

Having nothing now to detain me in Scarborough, I determined to return to Chester at once—albeit I had started with the intention, as I told Jack, of joining him at the mill about Tuesday or Wednesday. The fact is I was too cheerful for solitude. I had drawn from Yorke an admission that he had taken but a minor part in the crime, and a promise that he would give up the stolen will: this was far more than I had dared to hope for, and consequently I felt in that buoyant and hopeful condition which makes a man crave the society of a friend to whom he may impart some of his exuberant happiness.

However, I was doomed to some disappointment in this matter, for on reaching the mill between nine and ten I found that Jack had not yet returned, from which I concluded that the Admiral had prevailed on him to lengthen his stay at The Cedars. But, with his usual forethought, he had sent word to Mrs. Bailey,

telling her to prepare for me in case I should return before he did.

And fully the excellent woman carried out his instructions: the lamp was lit in the dining-room, and the table spread with a collection of good things that would have gladdened the eyes of any man less hungry than I; and that I might not feel lonely, she lingered at the door, giving me all the local gossip and some personal particulars, from which I learnt that she had been a widow five years and had no child, except Jimmy, who would soon be old enough to earn his own living, though that was a matter of slight importance, as, thanks be to Providence, she had quite enough to live on and keep another besides comfortably. She was a buxom, good-looking woman, on the right side of fifty, with a fresh, healthy complexion and a mirthful eye, a sound understanding, a sociable disposition, and, as I found, fond of a joke. Her conversation was so interesting

and agreeable, and it was such a pleasure to look at her, that I was quite sorry when, having assured herself that she could do no more to make me comfortable, she bade me good-night, and went off with little Jimmy, who had come to fetch her.

I spent the early part of the next morning in idling about the delightful old garden with a pipe, admiring the fruit in the orchard, watching the trout heading up against the stream as I leaned on the moss-covered wall thinking what a beautiful world this is if only one gets into the right swim. Then I went indoors and wrote a long letter to Kitty, replying in a cheerful spirit to hers, and telling her that I hoped before long to join her in Dublin. I could not help telling her in a postscript that we kept her portrait on the chimney-piece, and that Jack, when at home, never failed to put fresh flowers every day in the glasses beside it; for I knew this would give her great pleasure to read, and banish

dejection from her heart; then I found a couple of heartsease to put between the pages, and closed the envelope. But it never struck me until I had posted the letter that I had perhaps done wrong to revive a hope in her heart which I was still far from knowing could be realized. But that is the fault of my nature, and too often the impulse to give pleasure to my dear Kitty has blinded me to the wisdom of self-restraint.

After dinner the irresistible desire to have a good talk with Jack came upon me with such force that I resolved to go over to St. Botolph's, so, as though I were lord and master of the place, I called little Jimmy from the orchard, where he seemed to be in a fair way of doing himself a mischief with the windfalls, and bade him put the mare in the trap.

I had never handled a pair of reins in my life; however, feeling recklessly jolly, I thought I might venture, as it was Sunday,

and I should not be likely to meet anything on the road; nevertheless, when Jimmy asked if he should accompany me I accepted the proposal; and very lucky it was that I did so, for in pulling the rein too hard in turning the corner I took a splinter out of the gatepost, and in leaving it too loose as I passed a perambulator, I as nearly as possible ran over the nurse, who had the presence of mind, thank Heaven! to drive the vehicle into the ditch. After that I handed over the ribbons to little Jimmy, who seemed to derive considerably more enjoyment from these adventures than I did.

When we reached St. Botolph's I perceived that children were coming out of the school-room, and the next moment I spied Miss Strong walking towards The Cedars with the long-coated curate by her side. There was ineffable sweetness in his face as he assured me that he was *so* pleased to see me, though I believed he wished me at the bottom of the

sea for interrupting his *tête-à-tête* with Miss Strong. In the young lady's expression there was a dash of wickedness as she shot a covert glance at me from the angle of her bright eye. After the usual commonplaces I asked if I should find Jack at The Cedars.

'Oh no!' replied Miss Strong. 'We could not keep him. He had an appointment with Whitworth or Armstrong or one of those horrid gun people, and—he went. Wasn't it unkind of him?'

I assured her that all the guns in the world should not take me from The Cedars if I were Jack, and then, excusing myself on the ground that I wished to post letters before the post-box was cleared, I raised my hat, and little Jimmy drove on.

For the sake of giving consecutiveness to this narrative I will venture to describe what ensued between Mr. Shepherd and Miss Strong, from the account that young lady has since given me.

'I am afraid you are very, very angry with deah Mr. Sherridan for quitting you in this ungallant mannah?' said the curate.

'Naturally I feel slighted,' replied Miss Strong, 'though I know it is unreasonable on my part. Of course Mr. Sherridan feels that he ought to turn the affair to the greatest advantage now that papa has given him the gun.'

'Given him the gun!' exclaimed the curate, aghast—'that instrument which has cost him so many thousands of pounds!'

'You see, poor papa felt that he should never have the means to bring it to perfection. I dare say he ought to have sold it in order to pay some of his debts, but he is so imprudent! Ah, if he were the only imprudent person connected with this odious gun—if the folly ended with papa's abandonment of this costly undertaking!'

'You allude to deah Mr. Sherridan. I feah he is even more reckless and extravagant

than your papa. His whole career has been marked by thriftless improvidence and want of constancy. It is *so* sad, *so* shocking, in one with such great personal advantages.'

'What are the personal advantages of her husband to a wife, Mr. Shepherd? They cannot give that sense of security which is the richest dowry she can have'

'How true, Miss Strong—how very true! Alas! one sees too often that handsome beaux do not always make handsome husbands!'

Miss Strong assented with a sigh, and after a short interval said:

'I think you have seen Miss Yorke, Mr. Shepherd?'

'I have seen her,' he replied, with a scolding shake of the head. 'She is *so* pretty; but I feah *so* flighty!'

'Do you know why her engagement with Mr. Sherridan is broken off?'

'Deah Mr. Holderness is a very prudent old gentleman, a very far-sighted and clear-headed

old gentleman. And I think he must have sent Miss Kitty away from some prudential motive. But whether he can always keep them asunder remains to be seen.'

'Ah, well,' said Miss Strong, with a sigh, 'I suppose I must make the best of it.'

'But will you be making the best of it, and not the worst of it, if, as you lead me to suppose, you actually meditate giving your fair, your beautiful hand to Mr. Sherridan?'

They had entered the garden of The Cedars, and Mr. Shepherd, having artfully diverged from the main path into one of the sheltered walks, here took Miss Strong's hand, and after pressing it with fingers that felt like sausages, even through Miss Strong's glove, he raised it to his lips.

'Oh, Mr. Shepherd,' remonstrated Miss Strong, 'you must not do that! You really mustn't! For your own sake, I must not permit you to go farther and encourage a feeling which I cannot pretend to ignore, for I

confess candidly that if Mr. Sherridan asks me to-morrow to be his wife I shall give that hand to him.'

'Oh, Miss Strong! would you marry a man whose fidelity you already have but too good reason to doubt, whose foot is irrevocably set upon the downward path of pecuniary destruction, whose absolute ruin I may predict with something more than the conviction of an ordinary observer?'

'Pray explain a little more clearly,' Miss Strong entreated in a tone of anxiety.

'I shall endevah to do so; but will you not take a seat, deah, *deah* Miss Strong?' And Miss Strong hesitating whether to yield or not to the temptation, he spread his '*nice* clean pocket-handkerchief' over the seat to protect her dress, and, taking her arm between his hands, helped to place her as though she were a babe or a cripple.

END OF VOL. II.

BILLING AND SONS, PRINTERS, GUILDFORD.